REFUGEE ROCK

RUPERT S. HOLLAND

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REFUGEE ROCK

"You take me unawares"

REFUGEE ROCK

BY

RUPERT S. HOLLAND

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TO

JOHN CHAMBERS HINCKLEY

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	Comrades Three	15
II.	Where the Dog Led	26
III.	The Lone Fisherman	37
IV.	A Shot in the Night	50
V.	The Men on the Dock	61
VI.	Rodney and Craddock	76
VII.	Aboard the Smack	91
VIII.	A Night's Adventure	103
IX.	Treasure Chests	116
X.	Widdicome's Store	130
XI.	The Old Junk Shop	144
XII.	Widdicome Calls at the Rock	157
XIII.	When Thief Meets Thief	172
XIV.	Storm Signals	186
XV.	The House by the Harbor	201
XVI.	The Three Bears	215
XVII.	Secret Service	229
XVIII.	A Little Affair on the Beach	243
XIX.	In the Sand Dunes	258
XX.	Stand and Deliver	272
XXI.	Comrades Four	286

ILLUSTRATIONS

	FACING PAGE
You take me unawares	*Frontispiece*
Rodney let himself down the rope	98
It was the big bearded Ivan who stood before him . . .	168
He turned the box upside down	262

REFUGEE ROCK

I

COMRADES THREE

IT was mid-July, and the three mates were aboard a little knockabout, with motor attachment in case they ran into calms or storms and had to do without canvas, and the open ocean was blue and shining to the east and south of them, and the rugged coast of Maine lay to the north and west.

The *Penguin* was not a new boat; for three years Tom Hardy had sailed her from his father's float at Kittery under the eye of an old skipper. Tom knew every twist and turn of the little craft as a cowboy knows his bronco. And the old skipper had said as he saw the mates start on their cruise, "There's many a time I'd have given my eye-teeth to have a lad along with me as knows as much about a boat as Thomas!"

The afternoon wind was fresh and the sun was

warm. To the west gulls were soaring between the *Penguin* and the shore. Stephen Colt, a Canadian, and friend of Tom for many summers, was splicing two ends of rope, and Rodney McIntyre was drawing pictures in a note-book. The knockabout's master, keeping the *Penguin's* nose up to the wind, was trying to whistle a certain tune, though no one could possibly tell what tune it was.

Three mates on a dancing boat, sailing over a summer sea, and ready for any adventure!

"Golly!" said the lad from Montreal. "Cut out the music, Tom! You don't have to make such a screeching, do you?"

For answer the skipper gave a final defiant trill. "My voice is very much admired by those who know good music," said he.

"Your voice? Maybe it is; it's loud enough anyway. I was talking about your whistling. It makes me think of gulls screaming for more fish."

"Want me to sing you something? Name your tune, Steve."

For answer the black-haired fellow made a face. "Where do we go from here?" he said. "Is it to be a downy couch in another hotel to-night?"

"We've got plenty of food on board for supper and

breakfast. I vote for an out-doors bunk.'' Rodney looked at his arms and shoulders, which were blistered and beginning to peel. ''I don't want to dress up again if I can help it.''

''Right you are,'' said the skipper. ''We'll pick out a little harbor of our own, make a fire, and do some fancy cooking. Remember my pancakes?''

''And my scrambled eggs?'' suggested Stephen.

''I tucked away a couple of jars of jam,'' put in Rodney.

''You're the lad with the sweet tooth all right,'' said Stephen. ''That's why you're so fat.''

Rodney stood up, easing his blistered shoulders by straightening his back. ''You don't know fat from muscle, you skinny mahogany man. Ouch! Well, I do wish I had a leather skin like yours, Steve. And the worst of it is I never get a real decent tan. I'm always red as a lobster.''

''Some people like red better than black,'' said the skipper. ''You've got nice blue eyes anyhow, Roddy. I heard a girl say so.''

''Oh, shut up!'' growled the sunburned one. ''A fellow can't help his good looks, can he?''

''If you'd try a little cold cream—'' began Stephen.

Straight at the head of the other flew Rodney's

note-book. Stephen dodged and the book went overboard.

"Hard-a-lee!" sang out Rodney. "I'm going to save my sketches!"

Clad as he was in shirt and old duck trousers, it was the work of a second to dive overboard and get his fingers on the book. He came up alongside the *Penguin* as Tom brought her about. Up on the deck he flopped.

"Nice work!" said Stephen. "You do get around pretty spry for a fellow your size."

With dignity the stout boy vanished into the cabin to put on dry clothes. And finding the bunks looking very inviting he lay down for forty winks or so.

Meantime the knockabout, finding the wind exactly to her liking, was tearing over the water like a runaway. "If this wind only holds—" said Tom, squinting an eye like a professional mariner at some light clouds in the east. What would happen if it did hold he didn't deign to say, and Stephen, who wasn't listening to him, didn't ask him to explain.

"I wish," said the dark fellow, looking over toward the coast, "we could put up something on Roddy. He's always wanting something exciting to happen. It would tickle him to death to discover a sea-serpent

or a pirate. Even an old ship stuck in the sand sets him to talking about treasure sunk on boats in the days of Columbus. Nobody likes something strange as much as Roddy, and I wish we could cook up something of the sort for him."

"You're mighty thoughtful for Roddy!" grunted the skipper. "When we land to-night you might pretend you're a native American Indian and try to keep him from going ashore on your coast. Only I'll bet Roddy would get ashore all right."

"Nothing like that," said Stephen. "But I am going to keep my eyes wide open, and if you see me tipping you the wink just follow my lead."

Lightly the *Penguin* sped along, and as the sun began to drop in the western sky the skipper altered his course so as to draw near the land.

The sunburned boy woke and came out on deck. "Where are we?" he asked. "Must be nearing the North Pole by this time."

"Somewhere off of Boothbay, I reckon," answered the skipper. "There's about a million little islands along here. Suppose you take the tiller, Roddy, and pick out a port for yourself."

In spite of his blisters Rodney accepted the position of honor. Soon the *Penguin* was following a more

zig-zag course, tacking in and out, the three mates studying the shoreline for an attractive harbor.

As Tom had said, the outer edge of that particular stretch of Maine appeared to be islands, more islands, and still more islands. Not a house was to be seen, nor a wharf nor pier. Pine woods ran down to the beaches and to the rocky cliffs. Yet in the summer sunshine the dark forests, the jutting ledges, the little reefs where the waves lapped busily, were filled with exquisite color.

"Looks to me as if we'd struck unexplored country," observed Stephen solemnly. "This'll give you an idea, Roddy, of how your friend Christopher Columbus felt when he came knocking along here looking for a short cut to India."

"Huh!" said the steersman. "It was the West Indies he struck. Don't you remember how he smelled spices a couple of days before he sighted land? I guess you're thinking of Leif the Lucky or some of those Viking lads from Iceland. They're the ones who landed along this rock-bound coast. There! That looks like a right snug little harbor dead ahead. Let's take a look at it."

The *Penguin* pushed her nose toward the shore. "It looks like the Rock of Gibraltar to me," said Tom.

"The harbor's all right provided the wind doesn't come up from the southeast."

The island ahead of them did look like a vast rock, as indeed it was, though it was heavily wooded on top. Ledges of stone stuck out everywhere, only partly hidden by juniper and bay vines and low, scrubby bushes. At the base was a beach, several beaches in fact, shaped like scallops between pointing headlands. And one of these headlands had smooth, straight sides that made an excellent breakwater for a harbor.

The *Penguin* dropped her sail and cast anchor. Like a careful skipper Tom made sure of his moorings before he did anything else. Then he helped the others store provisions in the dinghey and allowed the crew to row him to the beach.

"Pretty snug little diggings," observed Stephen, casting an appraising eye at the base of the cliff. "Plenty of firewood to be had for the picking, plenty of nice dry sand, and plenty of boulders at hand to shy at Indians or bears or skunks, if they come nosing around looking for little Roddy."

Rodney, however, having been born with an exploring turn of mind, was already examining the country north of the headland. Now the other two heard him whistle and saw him beckon to them. Quickly they

joined him, and looked beyond a screen of bushes that fell down from the cliff. A hundred yards or so away, in the next scallop of beach, lay a dory, and two men were heading toward her from a cleft in the rocks.

"So it's not a deserted island after all," said Stephen. "I wonder if those two fellows could tell us if there's a spring anywhere about?"

The three mates crossed the headland and walked toward the dory. As they approached the two men stopped. They looked like a couple of fishermen, their skins tanned by sun and wind, their clothes faded to a coppery green.

"Hello," called Rodney. "Is there a spring on the island?"

"Dunno," answered one of the men, a fellow with a bushy yellow mustache. "Never heard that there was."

"Good fishing off shore?" inquired Stephen.

"Yep, the fishin's all right. What are you after? Fish?"

"Oh, no," said Stephen. "We're just cruising along."

"Going to spend the night here?"

"We'd thought of it," Stephen admitted.

"There's a town inland. Nobody round here."

"Oh, we don't mind that."

"Well, good luck, boys. We've got to be getting along."

The two went on to the dory. The three mates watched the men launch her and pull away at the oars. "Hello," said Tom, "there's a small-sized smack lying out there! That's what they're pulling for."

"What were they doing here?" asked Rodney.

Neither of the other two could think of an answer. But as Rodney often asked questions that seemed to have no answers they paid no attention to this one, but turned about and walked back to their own stretch of beach.

"It is a deserted island then," said Stephen, as they began to collect driftwood for their fire. "Nobody here but the three of us and about a million gulls."

A few minutes later, however, they heard a short, sharp bark come out of the bushes. The bark was followed by a dog, that appeared part collie, but not wholly so. The dog looked the three mates over and then came up to Rodney, wagging his tail.

"Hm," said Rodney, putting out his hand, "what is a nice little dog like you doing on a rock in the ocean where there aren't any people?"

"A nice plump little dog too," said Stephen, "that looks as if he had fed on plenty of bones."

"He's perfectly dry," Rodney continued. "He hasn't swum out here from anywhere."

The three regarded the dog thoughtfully, and the near-collie returned their glances with his big brown eyes for a moment, then began to caper about and show unmistakable signs of a desire to have someone pick up a stick and throw it out for his dogship to retrieve.

"Well," said Rodney judicially, "I'll bet he doesn't belong to those two men in the dory. He's not their kind of a dog, he's too well-behaved. And I'll bet his master didn't leave him on this island intentionally. No one would go away and leave a poor doggie like that. I'll tell you what let's do, fellows. Let's see where he'll take us if we follow him. It's early yet. We can build our fire and get supper afterwards."

"I knew Roddy'd think of something mysterious," said Stephen. "The adventure of the little puppy dog and the island rock. I'm on, lads. Lead the way, Rover."

The dog looked up, as if he knew the dark boy was speaking to him, and then, with a delighted wagging

of his tail, turned about and scampered up over the shingle.

After him went the three, each of them curious to see what their new acquaintance was going to show them.

II

WHERE THE DOG LED

AT the top of the shingle was a pebbly path, bordered with beach-peas and bay. The dog trotted along this, as indeed he had to do, unless he wanted to scale a sheer and slippery rock. Presently, however, he came to a little gully, leading inland. Turning into this he brought his three followers to a stretch of marshy ground, brilliant with purple iris. Beyond, a fairly smooth slope led upward. Here the dog raced ahead, turning midway to look back and make sure of his friends. Then on again he went until he reached the top, where he stopped and wagged his tail more excitedly than ever.

"There's something doing, I'll bet," said Tom. "This place is a lot bigger than it looks from the water."

The three rejoined their delighted friend, and found themselves on a small plateau, with a view of the sea to the south. Ahead were thick woods, mostly spruce and balsam. The dog frisked along, was lost in the

woods, reappeared again, and presently brought them out on the other side.

The three explorers stopped. In front of them was a good-sized summer cottage, built of gray shingles. And on a stretch of springy turf before the house stood a young man. The man had a long, shining rapier in his hand and was making lunges at the air.

The dog also had stopped and was rubbing his shaggy coat against Rodney's leg. The only sound on the hill-top was an occasional muttered exclamation from the young man as he danced back and forth.

The man was a striking-looking fellow. He wore riding-breeches and puttees and gleaming russet boots. His white silk shirt was open at the throat and the rolled-up sleeves showed slim, muscular arms. His hair was black and rather long. He seemed as supple as whalebone; tall, slender, wiry; the rapier itself seemed no more graceful than he as he bent forward, drew back, parried an imaginary thrust, drove again at his opponent.

His back was turned to his audience, and the duel went on for fully five minutes before the dog let out a loud, peremptory bark. The fencer whirled round. For an instant he appeared startled, then he grinned and lowered his blade. "Ah, gentlemen, you take me

unawares. The good Caesar has brought you here no doubt."

"If Caesar's the dog, you're right," said Rodney. "We didn't know that anyone lived along here."

The man lowered his rapier, and drawing a silk handkerchief from his pocket wiped his face. "Caesar is the dog," he said, smiling. "As for anyone living along here, I can assure you that except for my little household the place is quite solitary."

A gentleman, a foreigner to judge from something in his appearance and an accent in his speech, a good fellow—so the three mates sized him up.

"We're off on a cruise, the three of us," explained Tom. "Our boat's moored off shore and we thought we'd camp out on your beach."

The man was now twisting the ends of his small black mustache. "A delightful thing to do," he said. "I know of no pleasanter occupation than sailing a small boat. But since the good Caesar has been so thoughtful as to bring you here, may I not have the pleasure of offering you tea or lemonade on my porch?"

No one could decline such a polite invitation. The three mates went forward and as each shook hands with his host each told the man his name. "Thank you, thank you," said the fencer. "As for myself, I

am called Pierre Romaine. I was taking my daily exercise, you know. How quickly the arm grows stiff, and the wrist—ah, my friends, the wrist is more than nine-tenths of the battle.''

With his rapier tucked under his arm, Romaine led his guests up to his porch. A number of comfortable wicker chairs were standing about and he waved toward them. ''Make yourselves at home, I beg of you. I will rejoin you in a few minutes.''

The three did as they were bid. Caesar stretched himself across Rodney's feet. Stephen winked at Tom. ''Roddy was wise all right, wasn't he? Pretty nice—running into refreshments like this. What do you make of him?'' He jerked his head in the direction of the door through which Romaine had vanished.

''I like him,'' said Tom. ''Of course, he's a little queer.''

''Wish I knew something about fencing,'' put in Rodney. ''It looked awfully exciting, dancing back and forth the way he did.''

There appeared on the porch a servant, a tall and solemn-looking man, bearing a tray with tea-things and a pitcher of lemonade. These he set on a table. In silence the three watched him and waited until he

had withdrawn again. "Pretty smooth," observed Tom. "I'll bet Mr. Romaine has a mighty good time out here."

Then the host returned. He had put on a purple tie and a Norfolk jacket made of many colors, which gave him a decidedly gay appearance. "Ah," he said delightedly, rubbing his hands together, "Simmons has been quick with the things. Simmons is a jewel. On my word, I don't know how I'd ever manage to get along without Simmons."

There was a frank enthusiasm about this Pierre Romaine that was most engaging. The three mates felt no longer like strangers, but like old friends.

"Tea?" inquired the host. "It's rather nice tea; not the kind you get at the grocers' nowadays."

Each of the three boys, however, voted for lemonade.

"Ah, well," said Romaine, filling their glasses from the pitcher, "I fancy you know you own tastes best. Where I come from, however, we think there's nothing like tea, nothing so refreshing, so cooling, so delicious."

"Where do you come from?" asked Rodney in his direct way.

The young man took a sip from his cup and a bite from a toasted cracker before he answered. "Per-

haps it was indiscreet of me to say that much. My tongue is apt to be careless.''

''I knew you weren't an American,'' said Stephen. ''Anyone could tell that.''

''So?'' said Romaine; and for the first time a musing look came into his dark eyes. ''Can I ask you three to keep a secret?''

The three heads instantly nodded.

''I'm not supposed to be living here at all. I don't own this cottage. Simmons procured it through an agent. Simmons does the marketing at the village on the mainland. The only other person here is the colored boy Dan. And you three are the first visitors I've had this month.''

''We saw two fishermen down on the beach,'' said Tom. ''And they told us there was nobody on the island.''

''Fishermen!'' echoed Romaine. ''What were they doing here?''

''They were just rowing out to their smack.'' Tom looked around. ''You can't see the boat. It's hidden by those pines.''

''Hm. Now I wonder—'' began the young man. ''Simmons,'' he called. ''Simmons, come out here.''

The solemn servant appeared.

"Simmons, my friends here tell me they saw two men down on the beach this afternoon. What do you know about it?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pierre, but I know nothing about it."

"Ah, ah, Simmons." Romaine shook his forefinger warningly. "Remember that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. I don't remember who said that, but it fits our situation very aptly. These two are reported to be fishermen; but you know, Simmons—you know—"

"Yes, Mr. Pierre, I know. I'll inquire of Daniel."

"Send him out here," ordered the young man.

A couple of minutes later the colored boy arrived. Romaine put the same question to him that he had already put to Simmons.

"I dunno nothin' 'bout 'em, Mistah Pierre," said Daniel. "I was over to the town this afternoon. I'se mighty sorry, sah."

"It appears that I must depend on Caesar then. It was Caesar who discovered my three friends here."

"Yas, sah. Caesar am a mighty clevar dog. An' did he invite the three young gen'lemen up here?"

"You mean he's not very wise to be so hospitable? I quite agree with you, Dan. But we'll forgive him

this time. These young men are all right. They're to be treated as guests as long as they care to stay."

"Yas, Mistah Pierre." At a wave from his master the colored boy withdrew.

Romaine surveyed the three boys, a quizzical smile curling his lips as he noted how absorbed and intent each of them was over what was happening. "Well," he said, "you're wondering why I'm so mysterious about all this, aren't you? I haven't the least objection to telling you. It's because I trust each one of you as I do Simmons and Dan. I think I'm a pretty good judge of character. You've given me your word that you'll keep my secret, and I'm entirely satisfied to rely on that."

"You needn't be at all afraid that we'll tell what we know about your being here," Tom spoke up promptly.

"And we don't really know anything—except that you are here," said Rodney.

Romaine took a good look at the sandy-haired boy whose face and arms were covered with sun-blisters. Rodney appeared to amuse him; and back of his amusement was a genuine liking. "Ah, yes," he said. "That is so, isn't it? To tell the truth I am a bit lonely. Simmons and Dan are very good fellows, but they're not exactly companions, as I might say. I

haven't seen anyone of my own sort for a month, and I'm naturally a very sociable person." Here he cocked one of his long legs over the arm of his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. "What would you think if I should tell you that I'm a refugee? In the strictest confidence, of course."

"Of course," echoed Rodney. "We'd never tell a soul."

"A refugee from what?" demanded Stephen. The word had a delightful sound to him, but he was naturally suspicious of anything that savored of mystery.

"Ah, I don't know that I could go so far as to tell you that. But it's a fact that this island is my refuge, and that I don't want certain people to know I'm here. That's the long and the short of it, my friends. So when you sail away from here I'll ask you to forget that you ever encountered such a man as Pierre Romaine."

"I say," put in Rodney, "if you're in some sort of trouble why couldn't we help you out?"

"Spoken like an American gentleman," answered Romaine. "I'm sure I'd ask no better helpers than you three. But, you see—" Here he shrugged his shoulders. "The truth is that I'm almost as much in the dark as you are as to when or how I might need

assistance. I have simply to wait here and see what happens. And waiting is very slow business. Meantime I amuse myself fencing, in case any of my enemies should presently appear.''

Tom, feeling that this surprising man had said all that he meant to say, now stood up. ''It was mighty good of you to let us in on your secret, and to give us lemonade. No one shall know you're here through any of us.''

''Not a peep will we peep,'' said Stephen.

Rodney disengaged his feet from Caesar, who appeared to have fallen asleep. ''If you're really a refugee, Mr. Romaine, I'd like nothing better than to see you come out safe.''

''Thanks, thanks.'' The man with the purple tie beamed delightedly. ''And I'd almost be inclined to urge you to make me a visit here if you weren't off on a cruise. And a cruise does need the water, doesn't it? Not a steady old rock sticking out in the ocean.''

The three shook hands with their host and departed. Romaine waved them a farewell and Caesar wagged his tail from the top step of the porch. Into the woods they went and soon were on the slope that led down to their beach.

"Well," said Stephen, "I thought we'd run into some kind of adventure if we had old Roddy along."

"A refugee—" mused Rodney. "A refugee from what? You don't suppose he's gotten in wrong with the law?"

"He doesn't look like that sort," said Tom. "I'm sure he's a foreigner, for all he speaks such good English. And foreigners are always getting mixed up in queer things, you know."

"I wish I knew what it was." Rodney's brow was furrowed with thought. "You don't suppose it has anything to do with those two fishermen, do you?"

"I don't suppose anything about it, you old sleuth," said Stephen. "Pierre Romaine doesn't mean to tell you any more than he has; and how are you going to find out what's the truth?"

That seemed a conclusive answer. And as they had now reached the place where they had left their provisions and their appetites were demanding supper the three set to work building their fire, fixing their oven, and getting out the food. Further discussion of the rock's mystery must wait till they had fed. But each of the three was secretly wondering what it could be that had brought the man of the rapier to that particular spot.

III

THE LONE FISHERMAN

SUPPER of fried bacon and scrambled eggs, baked sweet potatoes, toast, coffee and apricot preserves produced in the crew of the *Penguin* the feeling that everything was going very well. The sun had set to the west of the rock, but the little bay was bright with the wonderful tints of the summer afterglow. A bonfire was ready for lighting whenever they should need it. And having decided to sleep on shore instead of on the boat the three had cut a supply of hemlock boughs and pared off the tips and feathery branches. These, with blankets over them, would make as soft beds as any campers could wish.

Stephen, sitting cross-legged in the dry, warm sand, finished scraping the bottom of the jar that had held the apricots and wiped his knife on a bunch of beach-grass. "If you were to ask me," he said, "I'd say that our friend on the hill-top was a Frenchman. They're great hands at fencing, you know."

"His name sounds like it," agreed Tom. "But

what would a Frenchman be doing way over here?''

''Ah, there you've got me. Perhaps Roddy's been thinking up an answer while he's been eating. He hasn't talked much.''

They both looked at Rodney, who, with a sweater doubled under his head, was lying on his back, looking up at the sky.

''How about it, old scout?'' said Tom. ''You're the deep thinker of the party.''

''Well,'' said Rodney slowly, ''I'm of the opinion that he made some enemies over in Europe and that he's afraid they're coming over here to take him back. As to his being a Frenchman, I wouldn't like to say. And of course we don't know whether Romaine's his real name.''

''Cautious as ever,'' chuckled Stephen. ''You ought to be a lawyer. They're always saying 'I wouldn't like to say this' and 'I'm not so sure about that.' ''

''Well,'' retorted Rodney, ''you asked me a question. If you know any better answer why don't you let us have it?''

Over the quiet water came the chug-chug-chug of a motor. The sound was to the south of them; the boat, if it came from a boat, was hidden by the next point of land.

All three looked in the direction of the chug-chug, but after a few minutes the noise ceased.

"Seems to me this neighborhood isn't as much deserted as our friend on top of the rock thinks," said Tom.

They were all still looking to the south when a step on the shingle back of them made each one start and glance hastily round. The solemn-faced Simmons stood there, wearing a fuzzy red and green striped cap that made an odd contrast to his sober black coat and trousers.

"Hello!" said Stephen. "Are you out for an evening stroll?"

Simmons bobbed his head and came up to the campers. "I trust you young gentlemen will pardon me," he said. "To tell you the truth, I was a bit uneasy."

"About Mr. Romaine?" questioned Rodney. "And our coming here?"

"Not so much about your coming here," was the answer, "as about what you said in regard to the two men you saw on the beach and the smack you mentioned seeing off shore."

"The smack was gone when we came back," said Tom.

"I'm glad to hear that." Simmons seated himself

on a log partly covered by sand. "Mr. Romaine is not always as cautious as he should be."

"Well, I'm sure he didn't tell us very much," put in Stephen. "All we know is that he's some sort of a refugee."

"I don't make the least criticism of his confiding in you young gentlemen," said Simmons in his suave manner. "I believe that the more friends he has the better. But I don't think he keeps sufficiently on the lookout for enemies."

"You mean the two fishermen?" suggested Rodney.

The man in black shrugged his shoulders and made an expressive gesture with his upturned hands.

"You know, Mr. Simmons," said Stephen, "our friend Roddy here is remarkably canny. He's the greatest little detective along the coast of Maine."

"Indeed?" Simmons looked admiringly at Rodney, who flushed even under his lobster-like sunburn, but paid no other attention to Stephen's joke. "If it were possible then to secure your friend's interest in Mr. Romaine's situation—"

"Oh, it's quite possible," said Stephen. "Provided you let him know the facts in the case."

"Ah, that's the difficulty." The servant took off his gaudy cap and thoughtfully scratched his head. "I

know that Mr. Romaine regards you all as friends—and yet it might be unwise to let you know precisely how matters stand."

"Is Mr. Romaine a Frenchman?" Tom asked bluntly.

"Not precisely," answered Simmons. "His mother was French, and he has lived considerably in Paris. It was there that he first took me into his service, eight years ago. Previous to that I had been valet to Lord Hartlepool. I come from Yorkshire myself."

Simmons replaced his cap carefully on his head while the three waited for more information.

"His father was Russian, and had great estates in the south of that country, along the Black Sea. They call the place the Crimea. I was there with them for a while. And then came the Revolution, and everybody who could got out. Mr. Romaine chose America; he has a taste for strange places. He is a man of remarkable spirit. I think he would like nothing better than to go hunting with some of your native Indian tribes."

Stephen chuckled. "I'm afraid he won't get the chance, Mr. Simmons. Most of our Indian tribes are weaving baskets out on reservations in the west."

"Indeed? Is that so? Really I know very little

about your great country. I suggested England as a place of refuge to my master, but he would have America. He said he had spent a number of seasons in London, and found the climate too damp."

Rodney bent forward. "But if he got safely out of Russia, why should he need to keep in hiding here?"

"Ah, he has enemies. You see, he knows certain things his enemies would like very much to know. And there again he did not think wise to follow my suggestion. I was of the opinion that a large city was the best place to hide; but he said he preferred a place in the open, where he could keep track of everything that went on around him."

"I think he was right," stated Tom. "I don't see how he could have a better place than this rocky island, with open water on every side."

"But look here," said Rodney, "why should you get stirred up because we saw those two men on the beach? They weren't Russians."

Simmons shook his head. "His enemies have agents. They belong to a band that has confederates everywhere. Any man may be on his track." He smiled slightly. "I make an exception for you three young gentlemen. It's not to be supposed that you are in the league against him. You are exactly what

you seem. That, and the fact that you have promised to keep this matter a complete secret, is what lead me to speak so openly. I feel the need of making friends for my master. He may need them so much at any time."

"It's very good of you to speak that way about us," said Stephen, nodding. He shot a glance at Rodney. "But it's a little rough on you, old scout, to know that you're exactly what you seem. Nothing mysterious about you, in spite of that pink disguise you've been putting on."

"Well, Mr. Simmons—" began Rodney, completely ignoring Stephen's flippancy, as was his custom.

But at this point something happened. Simmons suddenly looked round to the south, and then, without a word, quickly rose and hurried across the shingle to a near-by clump of pines.

"Hello!" muttered Tom. "What in thunder—"

The English servant had vanished. He seemed in fact to have glided across the beach and disappeared in the woods before any one of the three knew what had happened.

"The original gumshoe man!" Stephen whispered. "Gee, but his nibs certainly can make tracks!"

"Perhaps there's a reason," said Rodney. "Somebody's coming."

The other two followed Rodney's glance and saw that a man was climbing over the rocks at the southern end of their little beach. He was a tall and awkward-looking person. As he came nearer they discovered that he wore a scraggly reddish beard and that his clothes were almost ready to be handed over to a scarecrow.

"Howdy," said the stranger. "It's a nice night for a picnic."

"It's a real large night," assented Stephen agreeably.

"That your boat out there?"

"Yes, that's our boat." And in return for the stranger's question Stephen asked another. "Was it your motor we heard out on the water a little while ago?"

The man twisted his beard and eyed the three as if he were trying to make up his mind about them. He looked as if he had always lived on the water, almost as if he had lived in it, for his coat and trousers were discolored with brine. Before replying to Stephen's question he took a short, stumpy black pipe from his pocket, filled it with tobacco and lighted it. "Yes, that

war my motor," he said. "I left her in the cove t'other side o' the pint."

"Making your rounds of the lobster pots and fish-nets, I suppose?" said Rodney.

"Not exactly, young feller. I do that 'round sun-up, before you're out o' bed."

As he vouchsafed nothing more about his present business the campers kept silent, wondering what he would do.

"Seen any folks about here?" The stranger looked out over the water, as if he asked the question more for the sake of friendly conversation than because he was in need of information.

None of the three answered.

"Well, it ain't likely you would have. There don't many people come to this here place. I heard tell in the village there was a smack seen off the island to-day."

Still the campers kept their discreet silence.

"What time did you fellers land?"

"About five this afternoon, or a little later," said Tom.

The stranger grunted. " 'Tain't likely you would have seen the smack then," said he. "I guess she got away some time before sundown." He smiled, in an

evident attempt to be friendly. "You'll be sailing away yourselves to-morrow morning most likely. Having a good time?"

"We can't complain," said Stephen. "A life on the rolling wave's the life for me."

The stranger grinned. "I've been on the water for forty odd year myself. Fishin's my business. Fishin' an' lobsterin'. 'Most everyone in these here parts knows Ben Craddock. That's my name. I live around to the village, Swannock's Neck. Time was when there was quite some money in my business. I sold to the city markets. But lobsters ain't what they used to be." Sadly he shook his head. "No, siree, lobsters ain't at all what they used to be."

His remarks seemed to call for no answer. The three mates looked at the elderly fisherman, and Ben Craddock regarded them with melancholy eyes.

"Well, I guess I'd better be getting on. I thought mebbe you'd seen some o' the men from that smack. I'm a right curious feller. I always like to know what's goin' on. I was wonderin' what the boat was doin' here." He looked along the shore to the north speculatively. "Seein' I'm here, I guess I might as well take a stroll. So long, friends. Hope you enjoy yourselves."

With that the fisherman stuck his pipe in his mouth and resumed his walk, soon hidden from view by the headland just beyond.

Nothing was said until he had disappeared. Then Stephen, hugging his knees in his hands, rocked back and forth. "Well, lads," he said, "for a deserted island this place has got more people coming and going than any spot I ever saw. First those two fellows with the dory, then dog Caesar and Mr. Romaine and Simmons and Daniel, and now this queer old lobsterman Ben Craddock. It may be deserted all right, but it's certainly not the sort of place you'd call lonely."

"Craddock's looking for something," observed Tom, his eyes still on the point of rocks to the north.

"Now I wonder—" said Rodney, in a brown study, staring at the particles of sand he was filtering through his fingers.

There was the soft thud of footsteps directly behind them. "Ah, young gentlemen, here I am again. You'll pardon my taking French leave the way I did, but I was anxious not to be seen by a stranger. May I ask what you learned from him?"

It was Simmons again, Simmons come back from his hiding-place in the woods.

"It's all right this time," said Stephen. "But it's getting dark, and if you keep up this habit of creeping along the beach without making a sound you'll throw somebody into fits."

"I beg your pardon," the servant answered respectfully. "I'll give a little cough next time to warn you of my coming." He looked at Rodney. "May I repeat my inquiry as to what you learned from the red-bearded stranger?"

"He's a lobsterman by the name of Craddock, and lives at the village. He came out here in his motorboat to see what he could learn about the doings of that smack we saw off the island this afternoon. At least, that's what he said," concluded Rodney.

"Ah, that's what he said!" echoed Simmons, his tone indicating his doubt of the truth of the lobsterman's words. "But if I may put the question, what affair is it of his what the ship was doing around here?"

"He said he was a curious chap, who always wanted to know what was going on," added Rodney.

"Aye, he's curious; I'll not deny that. But what do you think of him yourself, young man?"

Rodney shook his head. "I don't know. It doesn't look to me as if he was on the track of Mr. Romaine."

"Anybody may be on his track, sir. That's what

makes it so difficult to guard him. I suspect everyone. That is, everyone except you three young men."

"Well," said Tom, "Craddock did look to me like a pretty nosey old party. What's to hinder our seeing what he's up to, if he is up to something? It's pretty dark now. We can do a little spying as well as anyone else."

"That suits me," said Stephen, springing up. "Will you come along, Mr. Simmons?"

The Englishman nodded. "I like the idea. But I may as well tell you in advance that if we come upon anyone I shall take to hiding. This Craddock person knows you three are here, but he doesn't know about me."

"Sure. You can turn ghost any time you've a mind to," Stephen assured him. "Fade away like the Cheshire Cat or turn into a tree. If we find Craddock doing anything he oughtn't to we three can handle him. Come along, lads."

The three made for the ledge of rocks to the north, Simmons following at a discreet distance.

IV

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

THE island was wrapped in darkness; there was no moon, only the light of the stars. To the right the waves lapped along the beach and gurgled over the pebbles in the shelter of the rocks. To the left were the depths of the pines and beyond the high black cliffs. Craddock had disappeared; there was no sign or sound of him as the explorers surmounted the ridge and came down to the next stretch of sand.

Tom, who was in the lead, remembered that they had seen the two men that afternoon apparently coming from a gully that ran nearly at right angles into the cliffs. When he arrived at this point he whispered to Rodney, and then turned in the direction of the opening. Soon he was pushing through bushes and then through the branches of pines. There was a rough sort of path, but it was largely overgrown with brambles. Progress was slow, for it was very dark here, and the fingers of briars and trees caught at clothes and had to be torn away.

Several times they stopped, and once Stephen whispered over his shoulder, "Are you there, Simmons?"

"Yes, sir, I'm still here," came the answer. "Though if you'll pardon my saying so I don't know what we're doing up here in the brush. I don't believe this is where Craddock went?"

"Tom's got some idea," Stephen muttered. "When he has an idea I'll take a gamble on seeing the thing through."

For a hundred yards or so they went along the gully in the darkness. Then Tom halted. "This is as far as we can go," said he. "I've come to the face of the rock. There seems to be a sort of an opening in it, but it isn't wide enough for anybody to squeeze through. Besides that, I'm sure I wouldn't want to squeeze in except by daylight."

"I've got some matches," said Rodney. "I'm sorry we left the flashlight out on the boat."

"Strike a light, and let's see where we are," suggested Stephen, who, with Simmons, now stood close behind the other two.

Rodney struck a match, and shielding it with his hand, thrust it forward. It revealed what Tom had announced, two bare rocky walls of the cliff, separated by an opening a couple of feet wide. But one of the

walls jutted out in the shape of a small shelf and on this stood a board. Across the board in staring blue paint were printed the words: "Beware Dynamite!"

The four gazed at the sign an instant before the match went out. "Dynamite!" whistled Tom. "Be careful how you handle those matches, Roddy!"

"I suppose it's hid away there in the cliff," said Rodney. "But what in thunder would anyone mean by putting dynamite in a place like this?"

"What do you know about that, Simmons?" Stephen demanded of the man close beside him.

"Nothing at all, sir. It's the first I ever heard of it. Dynamite! You don't suppose they were meaning to blow up the whole island, do you?"

"Who do you mean by 'they'?" Stephen asked.

"Mr. Romaine's enemies. But no, sir, I'm certain they wouldn't be intending anything like that. It wouldn't suit their plans."

"Well, we've certainly stumbled on something queer," said Stephen. "Why in the world did you ever think of coming way up here, Tom?"

"I thought those two men we saw this afternoon were heading out of this gully," was the answer. "Now I'm sure this was where they came from."

"There's something doing all right," stated Stephen positively. "'Beware Dynamite!' I'll beware it. How about hitting the back trail?"

"I don't see that we can learn anything more here," said Rodney.

"Very good, Simmons." Stephen put his hand on the Englishman's arm and pushed him round. "I guess you can feel your way out through the bushes. Don't be in a hurry."

Single file, they rewound through the pines and underbrush. Simmons moved carefully, vines were constantly catching at his trousers. But presently they caught the sound of the surf again, and then ahead through the branches saw the stars shining over the sea.

Simmons stopped just as they reached the beach. "In my opinion, young gentlemen," said he, "that sign we've seen and that ship offshore to-day and that chap named Craddock are all concerned in some way with my master. Perhaps you understand now how ticklish this business is. And I beg of you to try to impress that view of it on Mr. Romaine, if you have the chance. He is so reckless sometimes. It would be just like him to come down here and bandy words with strangers, when he ought to be lying hidden in his house."

"Or to invite them to a fencing match?" suggested Stephen lightly.

Simmons turned. "Ah, if it came to that—man to man with the foils—I shouldn't have much doubt as to the outcome. He's a rare hand with the rapier, is Mr. Pierre! They tell me he was a master at fence before he'd turned eighteen."

"Why doesn't he stay on his porch and defy anyone to come and get him?" asked Tom.

"Wait till you know him as well as I do," was the servant's reply. And with that he led the way on to the sand at the edge of the pines.

The four turned toward camp, stepping more freely now they were clear of the brush. But before they had gone ten yards there was the crack of a firearm from the darkness behind them. A bullet went screaming by. Instinctively they jumped. Simmons lurched forward in the soft sand and came down on his knees.

"What's that? Someone shooting?" he whispered.

"Yes!" cried Tom. "Get down in the bushes quick!"

All four crouched by a dune, shielded by beach-grasses. There they lay, waiting, listening.

"You see," said Simmons after several minutes, "there is someone meaning to do us harm. If he

didn't mean to hit us he meant to scare us out of our skins."

More minutes they waited. Then Tom cautiously turned and looked over the rim of the dune. "I don't see anybody. I guess it was a warning not to monkey with the dynamite gully. I'll steal along through the pines till I reach the rocks. You fellows come after me, one at a time."

With plenty of space between them the four slipped through the woods and came without further adventure to the headland. In the light of the stars it looked as if they had their own beach to themselves, but there was no telling what might lurk in the forest at its back.

"It's time I was getting up to Mr. Romaine," said Simmons. "I'll have something to tell him of this night's work. Good-evening, sirs. I don't know but what if I was in your place I'd favor sleeping out on your boat instead of on the shore."

"Oh, we're all right," answered Tom. "These people may be after Mr. Romaine, but they certainly won't bother about us."

"There's no telling, sir." Simmons shook his head dubiously. "That's the only way to put it. There's absolutely no telling. But pleasant dreams to you all, wherever you be."

The man disappeared by the path that led up the hill. The three mates walked to their piled-up bonfire and their three hemlock beds. The summer night was warm, the waves were crooning a gentle lullaby under the bright stars.

"Well, it is a pretty pickle!" said Stephen. "Who would ever have thought we'd run into anything like this on the coast of Maine? Talk about your adventures!"

"We don't have to make 'em up for Roddy, do we?" said Tom. "Got our hands full without half trying."

Rodney grunted. "Dynamite and shooting! I wonder if it was Ben Craddock who took that shot at us?"

"The old scamp!" exclaimed Stephen.

"And yet— I don't see how it could have been," Rodney continued. "It didn't look to me as if he had a pistol with him when he was talking to us here."

"Pistols don't take up much room," said Tom. "They make them very small nowadays."

"But why would he shoot at us?" Rodney objected. "He knows what we're doing here—that we're only spending the night."

"Maybe it wasn't us he meant to frighten," suggested Stephen. "Maybe it was his nibs, old Simmons."

"Do you believe all that yarn Simmons told us about Mr. Romaine?" asked Tom.

"Of course I do," said Rodney. "He isn't clever enough to make up such a story, and besides, it fits in with everything Mr. Romaine told us himself."

"Yes," Tom admitted. "Well, if it's true, then all I can say is that it's the queerest mess I ever heard of. And Simmons is scared of what these people may do to his master."

"Oh, he's scared all right," agreed Stephen.

"And I think he's got every right to be," Rodney declared positively. "I like old Simmons and I like Mr. Romaine, and I wish we could help them out."

"That's how I feel," said Tom. "But I'm hanged if I can see how we're going to do it."

They were standing about the pile of firewood while they talked. Now Rodney drew his box of matches from his poocket and struck a light. He stooped and carefully held the match to some dry grass and shavings that were tucked under the wood.

As the little flames began to shoot up he nursed them with his cap. Soon the driftwood had caught and the fire sent a circle of light over the sand. Rodney walked around the pile, pushing the logs and

branches into place. Suddenly he gave an exclamation. "Hello! What's this? What the dickens is this? Somebody's been here!"

"Where?" cried Stephen.

Rodney was pointing to a stick stuck into the sand several feet from the bonfire on the ocean side. The top of the stick was split and held a piece of paper. Rodney pulled out the paper and unfolded it. " 'You fellers had better be on your way in the morning,' " he read aloud. " 'It won't do you any good to stay round this island.' " To make sure of the message he read it over again.

"Well!" exclaimed Stephen. "What do you say to that! Of all the nervy notes!"

"Somebody doesn't want us around here," Tom stated judicially. "It certainly isn't Mr. Romaine or Simmons. Do you suppose it's Ben Craddock?"

"I think it's the same one who fired that shot," said Rodney. "But I'm not certain it was Craddock. There are some other people mixed up in this."

"If you ask me, I'd say it was Mr. Romaine's enemies," volunteered Stephen. "They don't want us around here when they try to pull off their attack on him."

Rodney crumpled up the paper and threw it into

the fire. "Well, how about it, fellows? What are we going to do?"

"I vote to stick it out," declared Stephen. "Of course we're off on a cruise; but I don't like to be scared away by anybody."

Tom nodded vigorously. "Same way I feel. Let 'em come and drive us off if they can!"

"Fine!" chuckled Rodney. "I vote for that too. They won't do anything to-night, and in the morning we can see what's doing."

"Want to bunk on the *Penguin* or ashore?" asked Tom.

"We'll bunk right here," declared Stephen. He looked around at the ledge of rock, at the bushes and pines, at all the island that was beyond the light of the fire. "We'll stay right here!" he announced, as if he was giving warning to anyone who might be hiding there.

They fixed the fire for the night, they lay down on their beds of boughs. Warm and comfortable, they looked up at the great expanse of sky, pricked out with stars innumerable. Far away over the water was a revolving light, one long gleam, then a space, then three short flashes. Except for the murmur of water the night was very still.

Yet none of the three fell asleep at once. So many things had happened since they had landed on the island that afternoon! So many more things might happen before they left it! Yet in time the waves lulled them into drowsiness, and before the late moon rose the crew of the *Penguin* were in the land of Nod.

V

THE MEN ON THE DOCK

THE three mates slept till the sun was well up in the sky, then took a morning swim in the cold water, and breakfasted on the beach. Some of the sense of mystery of the night before had worn off in the sunlight; the island, in spite of its secrets, appeared as quiet and safe as any other part of the coast they had cruised along. They joked about Simmons and Craddock, the dynamite sign and even the pistol shot, as they ate their bacon and drank their coffee in comfort on the sand. "I'd have half a mind to sail away in the good old *Penguin,*" said Tom, "if it wasn't for that blooming note warning us to leave."

"We can't take a dare like that," Stephen declared. "We might go out in the boat for the day, but we ought to stick around here for a couple of nights at least."

Rodney nodded. "I don't want to go till I know more about this business. You don't run into such an adventure every day."

"Spoken like a true scout!" said Stephen. "Roddy's right. What do you suggest we do now?"

"Well," began the sunburned lad, and cast a thoughtful glance at the woods behind them. "Well—" he started again. "Hello, here comes Mr. Romaine."

Romaine appeared in the path that led up to his cottage. He was dressed in white flannels, with white shoes and a Panama hat. He waved his hand to the campers and came hastening up. "Good morning, friends. I hope you slept well. No ghosts or hobgoblins disturbed you in the night?"

"Did Simmons tell you what happened?" asked Stephen.

"Yes, the good Simmons reported everything. A wonderful man, Simmons; though possibly a trifle slow-witted at times. Very English, Simmons; thorough-going and all that. But when it comes to using a delicate hand, well, I fancy that Simmons has more thumbs than fingers. Very reliable, however, and devoted to his master. And what can a master ask more?"

"He thinks you take too many risks," said Rodney.

The man in white flannels smiled gaily. "Ah, but

what is life worth without its risks? Now I fancy that it's a love of adventure that has kept you three here."

"I guess it is," Tom conceded. "After Simmons left us last night we found a note stuck on a stick near our pile of firewood. The note warned us not to stay around here."

"There, you see!" cried Romaine. "And in spite of the note you are staying around here this morning. I think we are birds of a feather, my friends." He sat down on a log, and taking off his hat fanned himself with it. "If there's danger about, I want to know where it comes from. I don't want to be caught like a rat in a trap."

"You could easily leave the island," Rodney pointed out.

"And run hither and thither like a frightened rabbit?" Romaine shook his head. "No. The wise general picks out with care the place where he'll make his stand, and then sticks to it. I've picked out this island. It may be a foolish fancy of mine, but I've determined on it. Refugee Rock, that's what I call it. And if anyone wants to get me, let him come and try to take me here."

The three boys nodded their approval. They liked

this remarkable man better and better the more they saw of him.

"Well, I must say," Stephen remarked reflectively, looking out at the *Penguin,* which was rocking lazily on the shining water, "the whole thing's about as clear as mud to me. We saw that smack yesterday and the two men on the beach and good old Ben Craddock and the dynamite sign, and we heard the bullet and found that message; but how it all goes together I don't see. If your enemies are about here, what do you think they're up to?"

Romaine shrugged his shoulders. "It may seem ridiculous, but I know nothing more about that than you do. It's a pleasant situation, isn't it?" Almost immediately, however, a serious look chased away the smile that usually hovered in his eyes. "I do know enough about it, though, not to want to be caught napping. I'd like to have a look at the waterfront of the old Yankee port of Swannock's Neck."

"We'd be glad to sail you over there," Tom suggested.

"That would suit me better than rowing ashore in my own boat. It's not so conspicuous."

A quarter hour later the *Penguin* had left the cove and was rounding the steep wooded heights of the

island. A dozen other islands, all apparently smaller than Refugee Rock, dotted the water between that place and the mainland; and through these Romaine directed Tom the best course to take.

The fringe of islands protected the little harbor of Swannock's Neck. As they approached this village it appeared to be mainly a long, straggling waterfront, with three or four lanes of weather-beaten frame houses rambling inward, topped by a hill on which sat a white church with a high steeple, and a couple of other buildings, which might have been school-houses or other meeting places.

As for the waterfront itself, there was a row of old, more or less dilapidated wharves and piers, a collection of fishing-boats of assorted sizes and patterns, and several huddles of old boathouses, warehouses and chandlers' shops. There were few people about, those to be seen were chiefly men working over nets or dories on the floats or on the shingles between the wharves.

"They tell me this used to be quite a place in the old ship-building days," said Romaine, "but it's pretty much gone to seed now. Fair sized vessels put in occasionally for cargoes of lumber. There's one of them, that schooner low in the water. There's a float

I use just in front of the barn with the rooster windvane."

Tom made for the float, and brought the *Penguin* neatly up to the dock. The four climbed ashore and made their craft safe. "Now we're here," said Tom, "I'd like to lay in a few provisions. Where can I find a store?"

"That funny old pitched-roof place with the gilt sign." Romaine pointed it out. "It looks about ready to fall to pieces, but they sell good stuff. Suppose we divide forces." He looked at Rodney. "How'd you like to come with me? I thought we might happen to meet Craddock, and you could introduce me."

"Sure thing," said Rodney. "I'd like another chance to talk to that fellow."

Stephen and Tom went up the street in the direction of the store, and Romaine and Rodney sauntered along the wharves. There was no one to stare at them, the occasional man they passed, busy with boat or net, simply cast them a glance and went on with his work. "A delightful place," said Romaine, "so quiet, so contented. But you'll notice we don't see many young men about here; they all go to the cities."

Swannock's Neck was so very quiet that Rodney

didn't see how Romaine could possibly expect to pick up any information. The boats were interesting, however, and so were the old storehouses, most of them with battered signs and odd-looking junk visible at the doors and windows.

Romaine was inquisitive. He wanted to poke his nose into the chandlers' shops, to stop and look at the collections of things that had to do with ships; several times he snooped through the little alleys that ran back from the shore. "I love the smell of turpentine and tar," he explained, "and I'm always looking for the old figureheads of ships that sail the seas no more, beautiful mermaids and such amphibious creatures that have lost their paint and grown a golden-green from salt. Ah, now here's such an old lumber loft. Let's see if we can't discover some treasure."

They had come to this particular place by an alley. A rusted anchor stood outside the door, leaning against the post, as if the ramshackle old shed needed such assistance to keep it from being blown away in the winter northeasters. Inside was the pungent odor of oakum. The two went in, and found themselves surrounded by a collection of sea-junk. Romaine gave murmurs of delight as he prowled about. Rodney, less

interested in such things, went over to the cobwebbed window, which had two panes missing.

The window gave on to the water and Rodney could see the low sides of the schooner that Romaine had pointed out as they neared the town. The wash of the crew was flapping in the wind; a young fellow, in dirty white duck trousers and a blue shirt, was emptying a pail over the rail. As Rodney watched he saw a couple of men come down from the bow and step ashore. They strolled along, and then stopped to look back. A third man, on board the schooner, had hailed them, and they were waiting for him.

Rodney caught a sharp exclamation at his shoulder. "Ah," whistled Romaine, "I was right, I was right!"

"What's the matter?" asked Rodney.

For answer his companion nodded toward the schooner. "The gentlemen outside there. They are the matter; and matter enough, if anyone should ask you."

Rodney had already been interested in the two men who had come ashore from the schooner; now he regarded them more closely. The nearer one was tall, with a black beard and big bushy black eyebrows that stood out in striking contrast to his rather pale, olive-hued face. Clearly he was not from New England; his

curious slanting eyes, the constant gestures he made with his hands, his shoulders, and even his head, and his costume all spoke of the foreigner. His cap was of dark cloth and very baggy and loose; his long coat, the same bottle-green as his trousers, was open, and revealed a red waistcoat; his boots were of russet leather and had checked cloth tops. There was nothing about him that looked like the sailor, though he might perhaps have been the captain, dressed in his shore clothes.

His companion was fat and ruddy, a strutting little fellow in a blue flannel suit and a white canvas cap. He was smoking a short black pipe, which he kept tucked in a corner of his mouth, and he talked without taking it from between his teeth.

"That fellow," muttered Romaine, pointing at the smoker, "is Nicholas Veedol, once public-house keeper, and now goodness knows what."

The third man had by this time joined the other two. He wore sailor's clothes, was dark and cat-like in motion, and his face expressed more intelligence than either that of Veedol or the bearded man. Immediately he began to talk, and Rodney caught the thick, guttural phrases.

"Three of a kind!" whispered Romaine. "The last

fellow is Paul Disdoff. I don't know the name of the tall one. Three fine rascals, friend Rodney. And what do you suppose they are doing here?" Romaine gave a chuckle. "Looking for me! They've come a long way to find me. How I would like to introduce my bonny Lady Isabelle to them!"

"Who's she?" asked Rodney.

"Lady Isabelle? Why, she's my bright and shining rapier. I should take Disdoff first, and pink him on the cheek by way of salutation. Then I would press each button on his jacket,—delicately, of course, but so he would feel the pressure. And then I would give him his choice of jumping into the sea or being carved like a fowl. As to fat Nicholas Veedol, he would be simply a pin-cushion for my lady. The third? Well, he has a long arm; with a sword in his hand he might prove interesting. Ah, what are they saying?" Romaine pressed close to the window. "I think I caught my name."

The big man was gesticulating. Veedol shook his head and glanced about. Romaine pulled Rodney down to the floor. "They might see us," he whispered.

The two in the shed crouched, while Romaine cautiously peeped at the men outside. Presently he stood up. "They're moving on," he announced. "I won-

dered about that schooner as soon as I laid eyes on her, and I marked this house as just about opposite. Well, at least I know more than I did before. And now tell me, were any of those three the fishermen you saw on the island yesterday?"

"No. I'm sure of that."

"Ah, that's interesting. Then perhaps the fishermen were innocent visitors after all."

"It looks very much as if they knew of that place with the dynamite sign," said Rodney.

Romaine sat down on a barrel, and for several minutes regarded the tips of his white shoes in thoughtful silence. "If only I could contrive to get these three to visit me at my cottage when I'm ready for them. The difficulty is that they have brains; at least one of them may have. Always remember in an affair like this, friend Rodney, that our opponents may have just as good brains as we have ourselves. It's difficult to think that, but it pays in the long run."

"It seems to me," said Rodney, "that if you really believe that those men are plotting to do you some harm, the right thing to do is to go to some officer of the law and tell him your suspicions. He might have them arrested, or warned away, or something."

"Tut, tut! my dear fellow!" Romaine shook his

finger playfully at his companion. "I'm afraid you take the same matter-of-fact view of things that the good Simmons does. I shouldn't have expected that of one of your age and adventurous disposition. Suppose I went to an officer of the law and did as you suggest; I wouldn't have a single bit of proof that these three fellows meant to do any harm to anybody. I know why they're here; but I couldn't possibly convince him that my opinion was right. They're not exactly what you'd call well-dressed gentlemen; but then that's true of a great many other people. In his eyes they would probably be merely three foreigners, who happened to have come to Swannock's Neck on board a sailing-vessel. Put yourself in his place, Rodney. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Rodney admitted doubtfully. "But still—"

"But still you believe in my story." Romaine jumped up and clapped his friend on the shoulder. "That's right! I know you do! Well, now I think we might leave this musty museum and take a breath of fresh air."

They went out the back way, up the little alley, and soon Romaine turned between two sheds on to the waterfront. From here they had a good view of

the fore part of the schooner; but beyond noticing that her paint was greatly in need of scrubbing they could draw little information from her looks. "It's no use to go on board," said Romaine. "In fact that's the last thing I should think of doing. Suppose we go back up through the village. That'll give us a chance to dodge if we see those three rascals."

"They don't know me," said Rodney. "I'll go along by the water and meet you where we left the *Penguin.*"

"As you say. Keep your eyes open. But I fancy that's unnecessary advice to an American."

Romaine turned away, and Rodney went on by himself. He eyed the man with the pail on the schooner's deck, and saw that the latter had now stopped his work and was leaning, half-asleep, against the taffrail. When he reached the stern he casually observed the vessel's name. She was the *William Howitt* of New York. There was nothing odd about that; in fact there was nothing unusual about the schooner at all, barring the three men who had come ashore from her. Then, as he turned again he suddenly found himself confronted by the big man in the bottle green clothes. The man had just stepped out from a shop and was holding an open map in his hands.

Rodney regarded the big man curiously. His interest was so apparent that the other stopped and made a snarling noise that sounded like "Hein?"

For a second Rodney stared; then said, "Oh! Is that your ship out there?"

The big man glowered, stared at Rodney, in his turn, and then, with a marked foreign accent, answered, "Yes, she's my ship. Bound to Halifax with hides. Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, nothing. She seemed such a big ship to put into such a small place as this."

"Hein?" snarled the man again. "That's our business."

"Of course it is," smiled Rodney. "I hope you didn't mind my asking the question."

The other relented; his black eyes, under their big, bushy brows, softened; and he nodded. "You live here? Nice place. First class harbor."

"No, I don't live here. I'm just a visitor, like yourself."

"Ha, a visitor. You have friends? On the shore? Or the islands perhaps?" The big man's eyes looked out at the fringe of islands, in the direction of Refugee Rock, the top of which could just be seen from where they were standing.

Rodney thought he had talked enough. He shook his head and smiled. "Good day," he said, and strolled on. Not until he was a hundred yards away did he stop and look back. The man in bottle green was still standing in front of the shop, studying his map.

"Hello!" sang out a voice from the beach. "What do you make of that feller?"

Rodney glanced round. On an overturned dory before him sat Benjamin Craddock, and he was pointing at the big, bearded man.

"What do you make of him yourself?" Rodney retorted.

"Come down here while I teli you," was Craddock's answer. "There's no good shouting when you talk of other folks. I've got something might interest you to know."

VI

RODNEY AND CRADDOCK

CRADDOCK had his little black pipe in his mouth and continued to puff away at it while Rodney jumped down from the embankment and joined him at the overturned dory. The fisherman looked extraordinarily wise. He was gazing, through puckered eyelids, at the schooner *William Howitt,* and scratching his bearded cheek with the nail of his forefinger. For several minutes after Rodney came up to him Craddock sat silent; then he took the pipe from his mouth and rubbed the shiny bowl against his faded coat-sleeve. "By golly!" he said. "It beats all what men'll do for a little silver!"

"Do you mean that big man with the beard?" Rodney asked.

Instead of answering that question Craddock asked another. "What did he say to you? I saw you two talking."

"You couldn't get very much from what he said.

He belongs to that ship, and she's bound for Halifax with hides. I think he's a Russian."

Craddock nodded slowly. "Well, I was up in the store there—Bill Jenkins' store—the one he just came out of; and that fellow came in with two mates. They asked a powerful lot of questions; all about the islands round here, and who lived on them. Bill's a pretty good talker himself, he told them a heap more than I'd have told them. And as near as I could make out they're mightily interested in the man who's living in the cottage over on the island where you're camping. Know that man, do you?"

Craddock glanced quickly at Rodney, so quickly in fact that the latter had no chance to evade the question. "Why yes, I know him."

"Seems like a right nice fellow, quiet and minds his own business."

Rodney nodded.

"Now what is it those three men from that schooner want over on your island?"

Rodney laughed; the question was fired at him with point-blank directness. "I thought you had something to tell me," he said, "but you're only asking questions."

Craddock's peering eyes grew less intense. He put

his hand on Rodney's knee in a conciliatory fashion. "It's no good they're up to. I'm moral sure of that. I've known sailormen for a heap o' years, and those three aren't the proper kind, my boy. They're land sharks, they are. It might be well to let your friend know they're after him."

"I shouldn't wonder if he did know. He's over here somewhere. He came over in our boat."

"Hm," said Craddock, and again he gazed along the waterfront at the *William Howitt.* "I wonder if it's a matter of holding him for a ransom."

"I don't know any more about that than you," answered Rodney.

Craddock pondered for several minutes more, then stuck his pipe in his pocket and stood up. "I want to have a look at that place of his. I haven't been up to that cottage for a long time."

"You'd better tell him then. He doesn't like to have strangers come prowling about."

"I'm no stranger. Everybody in this here village knows me."

"Oh, I'm sure it would be all right if he knew why you were going out there," Rodney hastened to add. "If you'll come along with me we'll find him. He's probably waiting down at the *Penguin* now."

But neither Pierre Romaine nor Tom nor Stephen nor even the *Penguin* herself, were waiting at the float. There was no sign anywhere of the smart looking knockabout; only the native, Swannock's Neck variety of boat, craft in need of fresh paint, and new sails, and general overhauling, were visible in the neighborhood.

"Hello," said Rodney, "that's funny! I'm sure this is where we left her."

A very ragged small boy was lying flat on the float, dangling a fish-line over the edge, his face so close to the water that he seemed to be watching the fish swimming around his bait. At the sound of Rodney's voice he screwed his head around. "Them friends o' yours give me a nickel to tell you they couldn't wait no longer. They said they'd be sendin' over for you bimeby." The urchin looked down into the water again.

"What was their hurry?" said Rodney. "I haven't been so slow."

"Dunno," answered the urchin without moving.

"Something must have happened. I don't understand it." Rodney glanced at Craddock. "It wasn't that bearded fellow that frightened them off. Do you suppose it was his two pals?"

"My boat's here," answered the fisherman. "I'll take you over to the island, and we'll find out quick enough."

Craddock's dory, smelling strongly of fish, wheezing loudly as to its engine, was soon chug-chugging out from the harbor, and poking its cocky bow through the channel between islands and rocks. Rodney, sitting beside the owner in the stern, wondered that the loud vibrations of the motor hadn't driven every fish and lobster away from that part of the coast.

The fisherman knew the little port on the west side of Refugee Rock where Romaine kept his own boat. He ran his craft in there and tied her up to the single plank pier that jutted out into the water. "There's the path up to the house," he said, pointing to a trail between juniper bushes. "I used to come over here with fish pretty nigh every week some years ago."

They followed the trail in its winding ascent up to the plateau and the cottage. Dan, the colored boy, was peeling potatoes at the back door and throwing the skins to Caesar, who pounced on each one as if it had been a mouse. "What you want 'round here?" demanded Dan; and then, recognizing Rodney, he showed all his teeth in a wide grin. "Mistah Pierre he

done go 'way this mornin'. I dunno when he'll be back."

"We'll wait," said Rodney. "Is Simmons in the house?"

"I reckon he is, sah. Jest step in at the door an' you'll find him."

Rodney and Craddock went in at the back door, traversed a passage, and came into a good-sized living room that ran the width of the cottage. In one corner of this room stood a dinner table, set for the next meal. Simmons was sitting at the table, reading a big book spread open before him.

"Good morning," said Rodney. "We wanted to see Mr. Romaine, but Dan says he hasn't got back yet."

Simmons regarded Craddock with evident suspicion, and Rodney hastened to explain who his companion was. Then he told what he knew of Romaine's doings that morning.

Simmons kept shaking his head. "I don't like it, sir. No, I don't fancy it at all. Mr. Romaine jumping about this way, and me not knowing what to expect next. I've been reading history, and though I dare say it's all very well in its way, I must say that the more I learn of strange places and strange people

the less I fancy them. I do wish we were safe back in England, where nothing oncommon happens."

"Oh, come now," said Rodney, with a laugh. "Mr. Pierre has a lot of good friends here. Mr. Craddock wants to help him, and there isn't much that goes on around here that he doesn't know about. He's told me so himself."

"Well," Craddock spoke up cautiously, "I know what goes on most of the time, but I've got to admit that I'm a bit baffled right now. Them men in the schooner and a couple of other things—" He shook his head, and, as if magnetized by the action, Simmons also started again to shake his head very doubtfully.

"Come, come," said Rodney, "I won't be scared by you two. Let those fellows come. We can take care of them."

"Man to man we could," Simmons agreed. "There's no man living could stand up to Mr. Romaine with a sword in his hand, and I'm not so slow at using my fists myself. But who's to tell what these people have got in their minds."

"Well, maybe we'll find out soon." Rodney turned to the front door. "You go on with your reading. Mr. Craddock and I will sit out on the porch till Mr. Romaine gets back."

The two ensconced themselves in the big wicker porch chairs and looked out at the ocean, where distant white sails shone like points of silver in the sun. Craddock began to spin yarns, and Rodney listened, at first alert, then more drowsily, as the fisherman's deep voice rumbled on.

For an hour or more they waited, then Simmons appeared. "It's past luncheon time," he said. "I thought perhaps you would care for a bite to eat."

"That's a bully thought, Simmons." Rodney sprang up. "It seems ages since breakfast. Lead us to the feast."

They sat down at the table and Simmons provided them with a cold lunch.

Afterwards they returned to the porch again. "I'm going to have a look round," said Craddock. "You stay up here. I'll be back pretty soon."

"All right." Rodney threw himself down on a swinging seat, curled up his legs, and was sound asleep before the tall figure of the fisherman had disappeared behind the grove of pines.

Presently he became dimly aware that something soft and warm was moving slowly back and forth across one of his legs. He opened his eyes and found Caesar rubbing against him. Now the dog thrust his

nose into Rodney's palm and began licking his fingers.

Rodney lay there, wondering how long he had been asleep and what had become of Stephen, Tom, and Mr. Romaine. The cottage and the hill top were perfectly quiet. Twisting his head, he could see nothing moving nearer than a couple of white-winged ships far out on the ocean.

Could it be that his two mates and his new friend had got into some sort of trouble? He sat up, and gently pushed Caesar off the seat. Immediately the dog looked up at him and then pointed his nose in the opposite direction. "So you've got something to show me, have you, old sport?" said Rodney. "Well, go to it. I'll come along."

Caesar led the way down the steps and round the cottage. Some fifty yards behind the house was a level stretch that had once been used as a tennis court. Here Simmons and Dan were hopping about like a pair of jumping-jacks. Rodney stopped, stared, then began to laugh. The colored boy and the solemn English servant were apparently fighting a duel in deadly earnest with swords made of wood.

The fighters were very intense and perfectly silent. Simmons had his left arm raised in the manner most

approved for fencers and was slowly pivoting round, while Dan, circling about him, was trying to hit the Englishman's shins with his blunt-ended sword. Simmons guarded his legs, and now and then lunged forward at Dan, but always so slowly that the latter had plenty of time to jump away, which he did in a crouching fashion that resembled a cat with an arched back.

"Fine! Fine!" cried Rodney, shaking with laughter.

Instantly Caesar darted forward, leaped on the dueling-field, and butted his head at Simmons' legs from the rear. The Englishman came down on his knees in a most undignified posture.

"Hold on, Dan!" cried Rodney. "Caesar didn't play fair."

The colored boy turned about, his face shiny with his exertions. "I wasn't goin' to hurt him. We-all was jest pretendin'. Mistah Simmons was learnin' me to fight like Mistah Pierre."

Simmons rose from his knees, his expression somewhat abashed. "I am trying to train Daniel in the art of self-defense, as it is practised by gentlemen in Europe. Incidentally it is a splendid way to keep oneself fit."

"Why, I thought you two were trying to hack each other to pieces," chuckled Rodney. "Those swords look pretty dangerous."

"Oh, no, sir," said Simmons, as solemn as ever. "You will observe they have no sharp points, and we make it a rule never to strike at each other above the waist. The worst that could happen would be a few bruises about the legs."

"Well, I'll take your word for it," said Rodney. "I've been snoozing out there on the porch. What time is it?"

"It must be about four," answered Simmons. "And no sign yet of Mr. Pierre. I'm beginning to get uneasy."

"And Craddock has disappeared too. I think I'll take a look round the island."

Rodney set off for the shore, but instead of going by the path to the south, as he and his friends had gone the day before, he kept off to the north. There was no path here, the ground was covered with juniper and bay, growing close to the rock-ledges and easy to make one's way through. He soon found that the island fell away to the sea in gullies, and that each gully made a fairly good hiding-place. The only alternative to following a gully was to climb down over the

cliffs, and these were so steep as to be most uninviting.

Making his way through one of these little gorges he presently came to the water at a point some distance to the north of where they had camped the night before. He went south on the beach, and as he rounded the next headland saw to his surprise that an empty dory was pulled up on the sand. The boat looked exactly like the one they had seen the previous afternoon. Rodney stopped to take his bearings. Yes, there to the right was the place where he and Tom, Stephen and Simmons, had pushed through the bushes and found the dynamite sign.

The men must have come again. Perhaps they were even now somewhere in the ravine that led to the rock with the opening. Noiselessly he stole to the edge of the bushes.

There was nothing to be seen or heard. Presently he wedged his way in a little further.

Patiently he waited. Then again he pushed on.

Parting the bushes he looked up the gulley. He caught sight of something moving; it was a man's coat. Now he saw that the man was Craddock, and that he also was apparently working his way quietly inland.

Rodney whistled. He saw Craddock stop quickly and glance back. Rodney waved his hand.

Craddock was going on again. Rodney hurried to catch up with him, but a bush tangled about his feet tripped him. He fell forward and his knee struck a sharp rock. The pain made him catch his breath; he sat on the ground, rubbing his wounded knee and muttering.

Then, to his great surprise, a hand seized him by the shoulder and pulled him over sprawling on his back. He started to yell, but another hand, big and smelling of tar, was clapped down on his mouth. "Shut up, you young rascal! Shut up!" muttered a voice. "Another squeal from you, an' I'll teach you better manners!"

Rodney perforce kept quiet. He realized that a man had come up back of him along the gulley and that this man had him at a disadvantage. He made no effort to struggle, and his captor, after scowling down into his face, removed his hand from his prisoner's mouth.

"Now you get on your hind feet an' come along with me," ordered the man. "But I give you fair warning, another squeal from you or any monkey business an' I'll sit on you like a ton o' bricks."

Rodney forgot the cut on his knee. He stood up, helped by the man, who still kept a tight grip on his arm.

The man pushed Rodney in front of him back along the ravine. The footing was none of the best, and the hand on his sunburned arm made Rodney squirm; but he kept his mouth shut. He had no chance to wonder about the man or plan what he should do; progress through the bushes and over the rocks claimed all his attention.

"There," said the man, and shoved his prisoner out on the beach. "Now you stand right still, an' don't make a hullaballoo. I'll tend to all the noises."

The man put two fingers in his mouth and gave a whistle. Within a minute a couple of other men emerged from the trees and joined them. In a few words Rodney's captor explained what had happened.

"An' we told them to keep away from here!" the captor concluded. "Looks to me like we ought to teach 'em a lesson."

"Just as you say, Jim," said one of the others. "We cert'nly don't want 'em around here for a day or two."

"There's room for him in the smack," Jim con-

tinued. "An' that'll show the rest of 'em we don't mean to be spied on."

"Suits me," said the third man.

"Good enough." Jim eyed Rodney with a menacing look. "We told you fellows we didn't want you around here. Now if you go along quiet with us there'll be no harm coming to you. But if you don't—" His expression made his meaning perfectly clear.

"All right," said Rodney. "I'll do what you say. Only please don't grip my arm again. It's sore as blazes."

Jim grinned. "You're a young sailor. Sunburn don't mean nothing to me. But I won't touch you if you act like a gentleman."

And, acting like a gentleman and a good sport, Rodney went with the men down to the dory. When it was pushed out into the water he climbed aboard. With two men at the oars the boat was soon pulling away from the island.

VII

ABOARD THE SMACK

RODNEY was leaning on the rail of a small-sized fishing smack, the kind that is built to withstand the gales of the North Atlantic Ocean. Not very far away was the shore of an island, rocky and studded with pines, very much like Refugee Rock, only smaller, and having no sign of any habitation. The dory had brought him out to the smack after half an hour's rowing, and he realized that the vessel on which he stood must be completely hidden from Pierre Romaine's cottage. A quieter, more secluded place could hardly have been found anywhere; the only sound was the screaming of gulls as they flew about fishing over the shallow waters.

It was the long summer twilight, the sea a glitter of colors, the western sky a constantly shifting and dissolving kaleidoscope of brilliant hues. The air was a trifle chill; he was glad he had worn his coat when he left the *Penguin* at Swannock's Neck. His knee was a bit stiff and his arms and shoulders ached when

he moved them quickly. But he had nothing to complain of in his treatment by the men who had taken him prisoner; they had given him a good supper at the same table with themselves, and had joked with him pleasantly enough about his knowledge of sailing.

But what were these men up to? There were seven of them, the three who had come out in the dory and four who had been on the smack. Two he was sure were the same men Tom and Stephen and he had seen the afternoon they landed on the Rock, the fishermen with whom they had exchanged a few words. They still appeared to him to be fishermen, all those aboard the smack, the usual sort of such men with whom he was quite familiar all along the New England coast. If they were fishermen, what was it they were doing that was so mysterious and secret they wanted no one to watch them? That it had to do with the ravine that led to the dynamite sign he was certain; he was also sure that it was one of them who had fired the shot in the dark.

They were doing something on Refugee Rock that they wanted no one to know of. Could it be something connected with Pierre Romaine? If it was it seemed very odd that as yet they had apparently paid no attention to him. Did Craddock know something

about them? Rodney recalled the mystery that Craddock had hinted at when he met the three boys on the beach the night before; he also remembered that Craddock had left him up at the cottage in order to take a look around the island and that he had caught sight of Craddock in the ravine. Craddock had not told him all he knew, Rodney felt certain of that.

Someone came up to Rodney. "Howdy, mate," said a voice. "What you stewin' over? You've got a frown on your face big as a hawser."

Rodney turned to find a young fellow, one of the smack's crew, standing at his elbow. "Oh, I was just thinking."

"Not lonesome, are you? It's a swell night."

The young fellow was friendly. He had joked with Rodney at supper and had told him about a little village in Nova Scotia where he came from. Now he went on, looking over the water at the shore: "They don't mean no harm to you, matey. They're not such a bad lot. You see, we just have to be a mite careful. You keep your mouth shut and we do the same."

Was the sailor going to tell him something? "Sure," said Rodney pleasantly. "They've treated me all right."

"There's a man lives on that island where Jim

found you, one of these summer visitors—isn't that so?"

Then the sailor was not going to tell him something; but instead was going to try to pump Rodney for information. Well, two could play at this business of being clams. Rodney nodded. "Seems to me I did hear there was some man spending the summer there."

The sailor turned, eyed his neighbor for a minute, and then burst into a laugh that could have been heard on shore. "Oh my! Oh my! You're all right, matey! You don't mean to loosen up any more than we do, eh? Well, that's perfectly square. But you did look solemn as an owl as you got off that little speech."

Rodney grinned good-naturedly. He and this young fellow understood each other pretty well.

"My name's Chris Wilkins," said the sailor. "I don't suppose you mind my knowing yours?"

Rodney told his name. "And I was off on a cruise with a couple of friends when we camped out yesterday on that island. Funny, isn't it, that I'm here on board your boat to-night and haven't any idea what's become of the others?"

"You're like the boy who ran into the wasps' nest; he didn't know what had happened till he got stung."

"It does seem like a wasps' nest round here," Rodney agreed. "But there's an old saying that he laughs best who laughs last."

"That's so." Wilkins' face suddenly grew sober, and as he looked away across the water he shook his head as if dissatisfied at something. Rodney, watching him, thought that, no matter what mischief the crew of the smack might be up to, this fellow at least was not naturally bad.

Night had now come, the gulls had ceased their fishing, the boat was riding quietly on a smooth sea. For a time Wilkins and Rodney chatted; then the sailor took his companion down to the forecastle and showed him his bunk for the night.

Rodney was not sleepy. He had had a good nap that afternoon on Romaine's porch, the forecastle was warm and stuffy, the snoring of the sailors in their bunks was by no means a lullaby. Moreover he kept going over and over in his mind possible reasons for the crew's presence in these waters and their evident desire that no one should know what they were doing there. After a time he slipped out of his bunk, noiselessly pulled on his trousers and sneakers, got into his coat, and climbed the ladder to the deck. Everything was still. Standing in the shelter of the deckhouse he

cautiously looked about; surely there must be a look-out somewhere. Yes, now he made out the figure of a man, lounging on the rail to one side of the bow. The man looked like Jim, and was smoking a pipe.

The only chances of escape were by stealing the dory or swimming to the little island that lay off the port bow. The first was out of the question. Possibly foreseeing that their prisoner might try to make off in the small boat the crew had removed the oars in Rodney's presence when they came on board with him. He had no idea where the oars were now, and without oars the dory was useless to him. As to swimming—if he tried that it was more than likely that Jim would see him and threaten him with a pistol unless he turned back.

Even if he reached the island, what could he do then? Most of these places were uninhabited, and it might be days before he could get anyone to take him off.

There was no use in trying to escape at present anyhow. But it was far pleasanter on deck than in his bunk, and so Rodney perched on a pile of rope and studied the vast map of the stars.

Low down was a planet, very big and bright. Rodney watched that, and presently from behind a head-

land he saw the black outline of a boat. The boat had a sail; she was skimming lightly along. She seemed to be about the size and shape of the *Penguin.*

The boat was heading toward the smack. If she kept her present course she would come between the smack and the island. Very much interested, Rodney stood up and leaned on the rail. He was on the opposite side from Jim, and the mast was between them.

Nearer and nearer came the dancing boat. She was almost off the smack's bow now. And then the conviction flashed on Rodney that the sailboat was the *Penguin,* and that Tom and Stephen were out hunting for him.

Peering around the mast he saw that Jim also had observed the other boat. The man was standing up straight. He would certainly not give the strangers a welcome reception. For a couple of minutes Rodney considered what he could do; then he picked up the end of a rope that was lying coiled at his feet, tied one end tightly to a stanchion and let the rope drop quietly over the smack's side.

The sailboat was off the starboard bow now. The stillness was broken by Jim's voice. "Ship ahoy!" came the guttural call. He was warning the strangers that the crew of the smack had seen them. "Ship

ahoy!" came the answering cry. The voice was undoubtedly Tom's.

Rodney slid over the rail as lightly as a cat climbs over a fence. He let himself down the rope hand over hand until his feet touched the water. From there he could see that the sailboat had come about, that she was going to tack in his direction.

"What do you want? Keep off of here!" cried Jim's voice.

"All right! All right!" answered Tom.

Rodney loosened his hold on the rope and slipped into the water without a splash. He had never swum in sneakers and clothes before, but the distance was not great. Noiselessly he struck out for the line the *Penguin* must take on this tack.

Jim still stood in the bow of the smack, apparently satisfied that the knockabout was going to sail away without further parley. Even had Rodney been swimming directly out from the bow the lookout might not have seen him, and as it was the man was watching the sail and not the water off the smack's stern. The *Penguin* held her course, passing the larger boat at a distance of some thirty yards. And then a voice sang out from the water, "Hello, Tom! Let me come aboard!"

"Great Scott, it's Roddy!" Round swung the boat and bobbed up and down on the water.

On the starboard side was a head, only a few yards away. "Want any help?" muttered Stephen, leaning out of the cockpit.

The only answer was a splash. Then a wet hand caught at the side of the knockabout, and a minute later Rodney was squirming on board. A couple of hands helped him up and pulled him over the rail.

There were noises on the smack, a jumble of angry words and shouts from Jim. The knockabout's skipper paid no attention to them. He brought his craft instantly into the wind and caught up his former course. On the *Penguin* skimmed, leaving the smack and the yelling lookout farther and farther astern.

"Good old Roddy!" said Tom. "Who'd have thought we'd find you swimming round in the water like a duck?"

Rodney shook himself, patting his wet clothes with his hands. "Why, hello, Mr. Romaine! I didn't know you were aboard. Well, well, it's a real party, isn't it?"

"You're right, old fellow, it is!" Romaine gave a little laugh. "What is it the people around here say? Oh yes, I remember now. You did that trick as slick

as a pin. I didn't hear or see you dive off that boat."

"Naturally you didn't," Rodney chuckled. "I slid down a rope and beat it out where I knew the *Penguin* would come. I happened to be on deck and heard Tom's voice hailing the smack. I'll bet that fellow Jim is good and mad now."

"You're a pretty cute kid," said Stephen. "But if you'll take my advice you'll cut down into the cabin and get on some dry things. That water isn't any warm bath to-night."

Rodney went below, stripped, rubbed himself dry and got into fresh clothes. Meantime the *Penguin* sailed along until the smack was only a dot in the distance.

When he came up on deck again the returned adventurer said, "I know you people are crazy to hear what I've been doing, but I'm not going to tell you till I find out what mischief you've been up to yourselves. That was a nice way to treat a fellow—give him the slip at the village and let him get taken by pirates!"

"So it was," said Romaine. "I owe you a good turn for that shabby treatment. After I left you this morning I scouted around through the town, meaning to keep a safe distance from that chap Nicholas Veedol

and his friends. I got down to the wharf and found Tom and Stephen waiting for me. But I'd no more than boarded the *Penguin* when Veedol and Disdoff appeared in the offing. I think they recognized me, and I didn't want to have any talk with them there. So I suggested to Tom that we leave word for you with a small boy who was fishing on the wharf, and clear out till those ugly ones went away. Did the boy tell you?"

Rodney nodded. "Yes. I ran into that big bearded fellow and then I found Craddock on the beach. He wanted to come out to your island, and when I found you'd left he brought me out in his boat. We had lunch at your cottage, and then Craddock started out for a little exploring."

"Well," Romaine continued, "when we got back to Swannock's Neck the boy said you'd left. So we went for a cruise round the islands. We had lunch on board, and must have reached the Rock a little after you set out from my house. We were on the porch when Craddock came dashing up, very much excited. He said he'd seen you kidnapped and carried away in a dory. So, after it got dark, we decided to try and locate your whereabouts. We sailed in and out and roundabout until by good luck we sighted that

smack. We were going to cruise around near her and see if we could pick up any information about you, when lo and behold, we picked you up from the sea. That's all my yarn."

Rodney told his adventures. "It sounds pretty stupid, I must admit," he concluded, "but I didn't learn anything at all about what those men are doing. I'm sure it's something crooked, but I haven't the least idea what it is."

"And you a detective!" said Stephen.

"Well, the plot thickens," said Romaine. "It appears we have two sets of unwelcome visitors hanging around my quiet island home."

Soon they sighted the Rock and headed for Romaine's landing-place on the western side. "You three are to come up and sleep in my house," said the young man. "We've got a good deal to talk over."

VIII

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURE

IT was just about midnight when the *Penguin* docked, and a short time afterwards that the four started up the path toward the cottage. Romaine took the lead, for the trail was not very well marked. Soon the lapping water was below them, and they had come to the edge of the plateau.

The path brought up at the rear of the house, at one end of the level stretch that had once been a tennis-court, and where Rodney had come upon Simmons and Dan fencing that afternoon. Pines made a wind shield here, growing in a semi-circle that prevented one seeing the house until one was almost on it. But as the four came up through the woods they heard a dog barking, and when they reached the edge of the clearing they saw Caesar running back and forth and sending out loud challenging howls into the night.

Pierre Romaine stopped, and gave a low, cautioning murmur.

Caesar stood still, his tail wagging violently. Then again he dashed forth, barking furiously. Soon he

stopped at the foot of the back steps, and the watchers could see that he was fairly bristling with indignation.

In the starlight a stick flew through the air, aimed at the dog by someone in the woods to the south of the steps. Caesar's answer was a yelp that made his other howls sound like whispers.

"Hello!" muttered Romaine. "What does that mean?"

"Where's Simmons?" whispered Tom. "He and Dan must have heard the racket."

"Dan can sleep through 'most anything," Romaine murmured. "Look at that blessed dog now! He's running straight at the place where the stick came from!"

Caesar was charging his hidden enemy, but just before he reached the pines three shapes emerged, each armed with a stick, and it looked as if the poor dog was in for a sound beating. Before the three could get around him, however, the back door of the house opened and Simmons appeared on the step. "Here, Caesar, here!" he called out.

The answer was a loud yelp as the dog dodged a blow from a club.

"I say, hold on there!" Simmons cried, as he saw

what was going on. "Don't you touch that dog! What are you doing here?"

One of the shapes, a big, bearded fellow, stepped forward. "Call off your dog, man," he said. "We've come on a matter of business."

"Aha, that's our friend of the schooner," Romaine whispered. "Don't I wish I had my good Isabelle in my hand!"

"A matter of business at midnight?" Simmons snorted. "What do you mean by waking honest people out of their sleep this way?"

"Yes, a matter of business with the man who lives in this house," came the stubborn response. "You go tell him there are three friends to see him."

By now the speaker and his two companions had walked forward. Caesar, making a circle, had joined Simmons at the steps and stood there, alert from nose to tail, growling like distant, intermittent thunder.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," the English servant said positively. "Friends indeed! Friends don't call in this way."

A shrill voice piped up. It came from the man named Paul Disdoff. "Tell him whatever you like, but get him out here. We have business with him."

"Yes, and he'll have business with you, you scrawny rat, one of these fine days!" muttered Romaine in the trees.

Simmons appeared to consider the situation. When next he spoke his tone was less angry. "As a matter of fact the master is not here to-night. The house is in charge of the servants."

A guttural growl from the big man. "Huh! How do we know that? We'll come in and see."

"Ah, you will, will you? I'd have you know that an Englishman's home is his castle."

"Bully for Simmons!" whispered Stephen. "He's made of the right stuff!"

"We don't want words with you," announced the big man. The three walked nearer the steps, each swinging the stick in his hand.

Around from the front of the cottage came someone, Dan with his wooden sword. "Hi there, Caesar, what's a goin' on?" the colored boy asked in his gentle drawl.

The men stopped. "Where's this man called Romaine?" the big fellow demanded of Dan.

"This man called Romaine?" Dan mimicked. "How should I know where he's a-gone to?"

"Br-r-r," stormed the questioner, shaking his head

like an angry bull. "You two fools mind your own business. We'll have a look at the house."

In the trees Tom whispered to Romaine. "You stay here. I've got a plan. Steve and Roddy, come with me."

Tom led his two mates along the cover of pines, past the tennis-court, to the next entrance out from the woods. Then he walked into the open, his friends following.

Meantime Dan had stepped beside Caesar, and with Simmons was confronting the angry trio, who appeared about to rush the steps.

"Well, here we are, Mr. Simmons," Tom announced. "I hope you haven't been sitting up on our account. We were out for an evening sail."

The big, bearded man and Disdoff and Veedol wheeled about and stared at the three young fellows.

Caesar, giving a howl of welcome, bounded over to Rodney and rubbed himself strenuously against his friend's legs.

"No, sir, I wasn't sitting up for you," said Simmons. "I never retire early. I had just come out to enjoy a bit of evening air."

"And entertain some friends, I see," said Tom, indicating the three men with a wave of his hand.

"Perhaps it would be more correct to say that they were entertaining me," Simmons responded in his precise voice.

"Don't let us disturb you," said Tom. "I guess we'll be going to bed." With Rodney and Stephen he approached the back door. "I say, who are your friends? Somehow they don't look as if they belonged round here."

"Well," said Simmons, "I call them by nicknames. They're the three bears. The one with the beard is the big bear; he growls and shows his teeth and makes considerable noise when he talks. Then there's the middle-sized bear, the one with the fuzzy cap who sounds like a tin fife when he pipes up. And the little bear's the fat one; he's as full of sweetness as a plum pudding; you should hear him laugh when I tell him a joke."

The three men, still staring, began to mutter among themselves.

"The bears are beginning to growl now," cautioned Simmons.

"Oh, we don't mind their growling," said Tom. "We can keep them in order." He looked at the big fellow. "Stay as long as you like; only don't make too much noise out here; we're going to bed."

"We want to see the man called Romaine," declared Disdoff stubbornly.

"Romaine?" Tom glanced at Simmons. "What's he talking about?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir," said Simmons. "That's the way they've been going on for quite some time."

"Yas, sah," put in Dan, "they've been a-goin' on that-a-way for 'most an hour."

"Seems to me it's time they were going on about their own business," stated Tom. "Look here." He turned to the men. "If you can't tell us what you want I think it's time you were leaving."

"Right you are, Tom," Stephen chimed in. "We don't want to be bothered with them any longer." He nodded at Disdoff. "Run away now, like good fellows. It won't hurt any of you to get some beauty sleep."

The men looked at the shipmates. To break into a house defended by three such young and athletic fellows, to say nothing of Simmons and Dan, would be no easy matter. Tom's words and manner indicated that the three lived there, and there was no visible evidence that Pierre Romaine did. Veedol plucked the bearded man by the elbow and murmured

something to him in a foreign tongue. Then the three wheeled about and beat a retreat to the woods.

"Good night, bears," chuckled Stephen, waving his hand after the three.

"Now Caesar, you keep your ears open," said Rodney, patting the dog's head. "If you hear them coming up here again you let us know about it."

They all went into the cottage. Simmons bolted the door. "Where's Mr. Romaine?" he asked anxiously. "He hasn't come back yet."

"Here I am," said a voice from the living room. "I came in the front way. Wait till I light a candle."

In the big room the light of the candle showed them the master of the house with his rapier in his hand. The scabbard lay on the table where he had thrown it. "You pretty thing!" he murmured to the shining steel. "You pretty, merry darling! I don't need you to-night, but I may very soon, my dear."

"You saw those men, Mr. Pierre?" Simmons asked.

"Indeed I did, Simmons. And you answered them to the queen's taste. I was almost hoping they would decide to try to come in and have a look for me. I think perhaps we might have taught them the lesson they're spoiling for. But they'll try again, never fear."

"I'm sure I hope they won't, sir," Simmons protested.

"Ah, but you don't know them, Simmons. They're obstinate, they have some of the admirable characteristics of your own English race; together with others not so admirable. They want some things of me, and they've come a long way to get them. But they won't get them; no, they won't. Not as long as I have such friends as you and my three young sailors and Dan and Caesar." He smiled and looked down at the shining blade in his hand. "And my Isabelle, my lady fair. It's odd, but whenever I feel myself in a tight hole my fingers itch for her. And with her in my hand I verily believe I would fight the legions of Satan."

Carefully, lovingly, he wound his long fingers about the hilt of the sword. Then, with a light spring, he stood with his back to the door. He raised the rapier, held it at salute for an instant, and straightway was fencing with his imaginary foe.

So quick was his wrist in its turns, so lightning-like the suppleness of his movements that it seemed to his audience as if he were really fighting an opponent. His shadow leapt about the floor and up the walls, gigantic, looming. His eyes were points of light, keen,

quick, decisive as his blade. The three mates watched him, hypnotized. Never had any of them seen such an exhibition of agility.

Suddenly Romaine darted his hand forward, gave a twist, and described a great arc in the air with the point of his sword. "There goes the other blade!" he cried. "See! I caught it fair, and sent it whirling! Hear it clash on the floor! The gentleman is at my mercy!"

So vivid were the actions and the words that the watchers could almost catch the ring of the imaginary rapier as it fell on the boards.

Romaine dropped the point of his sword and leaned back against the door, laughing. "He put up a gallant fight, my friends, but it takes more skill than that to equal my dancing lady. Ah, what a jewel she is!" He drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the rapier from hilt to point.

"I wish I could do that!" said Stephen, his eyes wide with admiration of this wonderful man.

"Ah, but it took Mr. Pierre years and years to become a master of fence," observed Simmons. "I fancy he took his first lesson about the time he learned his arithmetic."

"You are right, Simmons; I did. Well I remem-

ber the day when I had my first lesson in the garden at home. My sword was about one half the length of this and made of wood. And ever since I have had a blade in my hand." Slowly he drew the scabbard over the rapier. "This one was given to me by my godfather when I was eighteen. I think I would rather lose my right arm than have any harm come to it."

He placed the precious weapon on the mantel over the hearth. "And now," he said, turning about, "I want you, Dan, to take Caesar and make a tour of the grounds to learn whether those three men are still in the neighborhood. I have an idea they have abandoned their enterprise for the night, but if not, you might assure them that the fort is fully manned for their reception and the garrison more than ready to discuss their business."

Dan's big eyes beamed. His master was a perpetual delight to him. "Yas, Mistah Pierre," he answered. "Caesar an' I will tell 'em we're ready to give 'em a thrashin'."

"Well," said Romaine, "it's late, but not too late for a little food, Simmons. Sailing makes me hungry and we've done considerable sailing this evening. I don't know what sort of supper they served my friend

Rodney on the smack, but I suspect he can eat a little something."

The four sat down at the table and Simmons brought them cold ham and bread and butter and cheese and opened some bottles of ginger ale. Meantime they discussed the situation. "I guess Veedol and his friends know where you are now," said Rodney.

"Yes," agreed Romaine, "but they also know that I'm on guard against them. It isn't a case of snooping down and taking me unawares. Now I was wondering—"

He sat silent some time, turning his glass round and round on the table, while the boys waited for him to go on.

"I was wondering if we could use the crew of the fishing-smack to help us out of this little difficulty. You see, that crew is up to something around here. Now if we could only manage to have them and Veedol and his friends fall foul of each other— Get our enemies fighting among each other— Simmons, you're a man of considerable judgment, what's your opinion of that?"

"If you ask me, sir," said the Englishman, "I advise against having anything to do with any of them. They're all bad eggs, in my opinion."

"Quite so, Simmons. I agree with you. They are all bad eggs in my opinion too. But I 'm afraid we've got to have something to do with them nevertheless. Now if we could get the bad eggs hitting each other." Romaine paused, stared at his glass, shook his head, and finally observed, "No, I must sleep on that. I think perhaps there may be something in it, but I can't say now." He looked up at his guests. "I know you won't mind my keeping some things secret. Perhaps some day I will tell you what lies between me and these rascals from over the ocean. Only I beg you not to be surprised at anything I may do. Ah, here comes Dan. Is the coast clear?"

The colored boy nodded. "Caesar couldn't smell 'em out anywheres, Mistah Pierre; no, that he couldn't. I think they must a-sailed away."

"Good enough, Dan. Then let's be off to bed. Simmons, will you kindly see that all the doors and windows are properly barricaded."

There were two guest rooms with three beds, and into these the shipmates rolled as quickly as they could. The cottage on the top of the Rock was quiet all that night.

IX

TREASURE CHESTS

THE shipmates were lounging on top of the cliff the next afternoon. Far below the waves were rolling in, and striking a long reef were dashing up in fountains of spray, shot through by the sunlight. The gulls were at their usual business of floating through the air, flapping their great wings as they went skyward, and then spreading them out like stretches of canvas and soaring on and on, without a seeming quiver from beak to tail. The young ones were pure white, soft and plump of body, with sharp red beaks that gave them a wicked look as they hovered over the water, ready to drop on a fish. The older ones were much bigger and darker, beaten by many winds and rains, flying more leisurely and making less noise. The shipmates, lying outstretched on the warm, short grass, watched the gulls and the leaping surf and kept watch on the chain of northern islands for the glint of a sail.

"Seals!" said Stephen, and pointed to a low rock

some distance from the shore. "This is the time they begin to come down from the Canadian waters. There'll be more and more of them now until October."

All three watched the round, shiny bodies of a couple of brownish harbor seals emerge from the waves and roll and push and nose their way on to a flat ledge. Queer looking creatures they were, as much like tightly-filled bags of meal as anything else. When they came out of the water they were drab-brown, but the longer they lay in the sun, slowly flapping their wide tails like rudders, the lighter in color they grew, until they were almost white. Then some noise frightened the basking pair, and with extraordinary quickness for such unwieldy creatures they had slipped from their perch and were back in the sea again, only showing their snouts from time to time as they swam about the rock.

The shipmates had all seen such seals before in the northern waters of Maine. "I don't suppose you ever saw the real fur-bearing seals up in Canada, did you, Steve?" asked Tom.

The boy from Montreal laughed. "Never except in the Zoo, or stuffed in fur-shop windows. Next thing you'll be asking me if I ever played tag with polar bears on the ice. Canada's a big country. I've been

up to Lake St. John with my father, fishing for land-locked salmon, but I've never been to Labrador or any of the real cold places."

"Men like Craddock don't care much for those fellows out there," put in Rodney, nodding toward the ledge of rock where the brown seals had recently perched. "They eat the fish and the lobsters. I don't know that I blame the seals much for that. I like lobsters myself."

"There's nothing better," said Tom. "Broiled live lobster—oh, yum—yum!"

"Speaking of Craddock," said Stephen, "what is that fellow's game? He's nosing around for something. He was hunting all over the Rock yesterday afternoon when those men caught Roddy."

"Dynamite," answered Tom. "He wants to get his hands on some of that dynamite."

"Rats!" exclaimed Stephen. "You know as well as I do that that sign's a fake."

Tom was silent, and the black-haired fellow turned to look at Rodney. "What's your guess, Mr. Sherlock Holmes? You haven't been giving us any of your deductions lately."

Rodney lay back on the grass, his hands clasped under his head. "I think that Craddock scents some

money somewhere, more money than he can make out of fish and lobsters."

"Money? You don't suppose those men from the smack are hiding gold pieces in that cave in the rock?" Stephen sat up, very much interested.

"Not money exactly; but something that's worth money."

"Oh, come, you old sleuth. This isn't the day of Captain Kidd."

"I think Roddy's right," declared Tom. "All signs point to their hiding something valuable, something they don't want anyone else to find."

"Well, they're not pirates," said Stephen.

Rodney sat up, clasped his hands about his knees and rocked back and forth in his favorite fashion. "No, they're not pirates exactly. They're smugglers."

"Smugglers!" exclaimed Stephen.

Rodney nodded wisely. "They've come down from your part of the world, Steve, and they're waiting their chance to get something across here without Uncle Sam knowing anything about it."

"Well, for goodness' sake, Roddy! Why don't they do it? What's to hinder their dumping their stuff anywhere along shore?"

Rodney looked at his excited friend and slowly shook his head. "It isn't as simple as that, dear boy. You have to have assistance from the other end. What good would their stuff do set down on the rocks or in the woods somewhere?"

"And where is their assistance coming from, O wise one?"

"I have an idea the other end of the business is to be found in the town of Swannock's Neck. But the game isn't quite ripe yet."

Stephen stared at Rodney. "Well, that certainly does beat all!" he said. "So we've run into a bunch of smugglers as well as into Romaine's pretty Russian bears!"

"What did Mr. Romaine mean when he spoke last night of setting one band of men against the other?" inquired Tom.

"Set a thief to catch a thief," Rodney answered. "That would be fine if we only knew how to work it."

Stephen was looking down over the cliff, and suddenly he bent forward. "Who's that?" he exclaimed, "and what is he carrying?"

Instantly the other two were craning their necks over the edge.

Far below, along a path that led to the base of the

cliff, a man was moving. In each arm he held a package, and each was of considerable weight to judge from the way in which the bearer stooped.

"Why," muttered Tom, "it's Simmons!"

"Surely is," agreed Stephen. "I'd know the way he plants his feet anywhere. He walks as carefully as if he were carrying a tray full of tea things."

"Do you suppose he's going out in the rowboat?" Tom asked.

In a moment or two it was clear that Simmons was not going out in the rowboat. Instead he went along the base of the cliff to a place where a gnarled pine jutted out from the bank. Here he set down his two packages carefully. Then he drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. Afterwards he fanned himself with his straw hat while he looked across the water.

"Those things are boxes," said Rodney, "and fairly heavy too."

"Now don't you go telling me that Simmons is a smuggler," retorted Stephen. "If you do, I won't believe you anyhow."

"Well, what in thunder is he doing?" demanded Tom, leaning as far forward as he dared.

Simmons was bending over now, apparently taking

something from the side of the cliff at the roots of the gnarled tree. Then he lifted one box. It disappeared. He lifted the second. That also vanished. He stood up, looking carefully all around him. Then he took a pipe from his pocket, filled it, lit it, and strolled along the beach.

Tom sat back on his haunches, whistling softly. "Treasure chests!" he murmured. "Tucking them away where nobody'll be the wiser."

"Say," said Stephen, "if this goes on I'll think that everybody's got a secret except myself. Look here; you two fellows aren't hiding anything on this island, are you?"

"I didn't suspect Simmons," said Rodney, pulling a blade of grass and chewing it meditatively. "I'm sure he's perfectly loyal to Mr. Romaine."

"Well, you'd better start right now suspecting everybody," said Stephen. "It's the only safe plan. How do we know that Pierre Romaine himself isn't some sort of villain?"

"If he is," answered Rodney, "I'm going to stick by him anyway. He's a whole lot more to my taste than those three men who came in the schooner."

"Steve's only joking," said Tom. "He likes Romaine as much as you and I do. What do you say to

going down and having a little chat with Simmons?''

The three went down the path and came out on the shore opposite the place where Romaine's rowboat was fastened to its plank pier. Simmons was still strolling on the beach. Seeing them, he drew near. ''A peaceful scene,'' he observed. ''It puts me in mind of some of the better class of our English watering-places.''

''Does it indeed?'' said Stephen, who couldn't resist a little mimicking of the man's formal tones. ''But you haven't forgotten that all sorts of wild things happen in America, especially on the sea-coast, that couldn't possibly happen in well-behaved England.''

''Indeed I haven't, Mr. Stephen. I wish I could.''

Stephen glanced around him with an air of mystery. Then, lowering his voice, he said, ''Simmons, have you ever heard of Captain Kidd?''

The man wrinkled his brow. ''Captain Kidd?'' he repeated thoughtfully. ''Was he an officer in the American army?''

''Not exactly. Think again. He was a sea captain. As a matter of fact, I believe he was an Englishman.''

''Ha,'' said Simmons. ''I'm afraid I'm not as well up in the history of the navy as I should be.''

''Well,'' said Stephen, ''I'll tell you. Captain Kidd was a very famous pirate.''

"Ah," Simmons exclaimed, "now I do remember. Yes, Mr. Stephen, I believe he was a well-known pirate."

"Sure he was! And he grew rich at the business. He used to take pieces of gold and silver from the ships he captured, and hide them in chests on the islands along the Atlantic coast. People still hunt for his treasure. We were wondering if those men from the fishing smack were looking for something like that around here."

"Dear me, dear me!" ejaculated Simmons. "Do you really fancy they might be?"

"You haven't seen any signs of boxes hidden in the rocks or cliffs, have you?"

Simmons' face reddened, he appeared somewhat confused. "The idea is entirely new to me," he said hesitatingly. "You gentlemen know of the little ravine with the dynamite sign. Beyond that—" He shrugged his shoulders, then glanced at the ocean. "So that's what those men are after, in your opinion? It's a relief to my mind. I had some fear they were here on account of my master."

Stephen shook his head at Tom and Rodney; in his opinion Simmons had no intention of confessing what he had done with the two boxes they had seen him bring

down the path. Then, as the serving-man turned toward the three again, Stephen abruptly changed the subject. "Time to be going up to the house, isn't it? It won't do to leave Mr. Romaine alone too long."

"That's right, Mr. Stephen; it won't." Simmons, who had been sauntering on the beach as if he had nothing to do but enjoy the late afternoon, now showed signs of hurry. "If you don't mind, I'll go back at once. He's been busy with his papers most of the day, but I don't like to leave him alone; not after what happened last night."

Simmons made a hasty departure, followed more slowly by the others. As they went up to the path each of the three glanced at the bank where the roots of the twisted pine protruded. Nothing unusual was to be seen there, only what looked like the smooth surface of gray-green moss.

Romaine was sitting on his porch, smoking a calabash pipe, and his three guests chatted with him until it was time for dinner.

The dinner was excellent, and the feeling of adventure that had taken possession of all of them made for lively talk. Romaine had a great deal to say about Europe, and answered all questions with so much hu-

mor that his listeners were kept in constant laughter. When they had finished they sat outdoors again, but presently Romaine rose, saying, "I still have a little more writing to do. If anything should happen to me—" he smiled and shrugged his shoulders—"I want to make some things clear about my adventures. I'm making a personal record. Not that I think anything will go wrong, you understand. But a good sailor keeps a log of his voyages."

"Of course," agreed Tom. "Don't you bother about us."

The summer night was soft and still. For a time the shipmates lounged at ease on the porch. But after a while each of the three grew restless. What were the men of the fishing-smack doing? What were the Russians doing? What were Craddock and Simmons doing? It was not in human nature to sit still when many mysteries might be unfolding near at hand. With one accord the shipmates got up and wandered away from the cottage.

Without any definite plan in mind they took their way down to the beach. It was dark now, and as they perched on the rocks near their first camping-ground they seemed to have the shore and the sea to themselves. A half-hour passed in chat. Then, on a head-

land to the north of them a torch shone forth, a flaming light waved in the air in great circles.

The mates watched the beacon. After several minutes it went out, as though someone had thrown the torch into the water.

"There's something doing, lads!" muttered Tom. "That can't be very far from the smugglers' cave."

Over the rocks and the sand they hurried. They saw a boat put out from the beach ahead of them, not a dory this time, but a motor boat. They could catch the beating put-put of the engine.

There was no one left on the shore, so far as they could see. "Come; let's beat it!" whispered Stephen.

They ran after the boat, gaining on it, got almost opposite it as they reached the northern point of the island.

"It's not going out to the smack," panted Rodney. "It's going to the mainland."

"What do you say to following it?" asked Tom.

"All right. We're on," urged Stephen.

The *Penguin* lay at Romaine's dock only a short distance away. In five minutes her crew had tumbled aboard her. Tom started the engine, while Stephen crouched in the bow, keeping his eyes on the course of the other boat.

The *Penguin* was fast enough to stay in sight of her quarry. Through the lanes between the islands she made her pursuit. Soon the scattering lights of the village shone above the edge of the water. "It's Swannock's Neck she's bound for," said Rodney. "Not too fast, Tom. We don't want to overhaul her."

Tom slowed his engine. The other boat was going more slowly now. She was nearing the shore, and apparently heading for a wharf at the upper end of the town.

The put-put in front of them stopped, the other boat was rounding in on her own headway. The *Penguin* stopped too. Silently, a hundred yards from shore, the crew of three watched what was happening before them.

A man on the wharf caught the bow of the other boat, and then took the end of some big object that was pushed up toward him. A man got out of the boat, and made his craft fast to the wharf. Then the two picked up the object, and carrying it between them hurried up on the waterfront in the direction of the village.

The *Penguin* gently and smoothly slid up to the dock, was fastened, and discharged her eager crew. The three climbed to the road. A light, shining from a cot-

tage window, showed them the figures they sought disappearing around a picket fence.

"Lightfoot work, this," said Stephen. "Three's a crowd in this sleepy village. I'll go to the left of that house, and you two take to the right. We mustn't let those fellows get away till we know what they're up to."

"Three whistles—two short and one long," said Tom. "That's our signal. Cut along there, Steve."

Stephen darted one way, and Tom and Rodney the other. The two men had disappeared now, but the pursuers knew the direction they had taken.

X

WIDDICOME'S STORE

SILAS WIDDICOME, General Store—that was the sign over the door of the two-story frame building in front of which Tom and Rodney presently drew up. It was not nearly so pretentious as the store that the postmaster, Elijah Bascom, managed fifty yards or so away on the same street. It had a porch in front and its weather-stained clapboards were liberally besprinkled with a variety of advertisements that looked almost as ancient as the wood itself. In the two lower windows was a collection of merchandise only dimly visible in the light of the stars.

"I'm certain they went in here," Rodney whispered.

Tom nodded. There was no other building close at hand; the nearest was a tiny cottage on the other side of a potato patch.

"I wonder what's become of Steve?" Tom whispered. "Do you suppose he went down that other street?"

The two stood still and listened. There was not a sound to be heard. Swannock's Neck went to bed

early; only a light here and there behind some curtained window spoke of people still moving about.

And the store of Silas Widdicome was absolutely dark, and equally absolutely silent. Yet Tom was as certain as Rodney that he had seen the figures of two men carrying something up those front steps only a few minutes before.

Tom nudged his companion and beckoned with his head. They jumped the fence into the potato patch and made their way around the side of the store. All the windows were dark; if Mr. Widdicome lived in the house he must be now in bed or else hadn't yet come home.

The two sat on the tongue of a cart in the backyard and considered the situation. In the midst of their whisperings Rodney glanced up at the building again. To his surprise a light now showed at one of the second story windows.

A small shed projected at the rear of the store. The lighted window was not above this, but around the corner. There was, however, no perch that would give a view into this window, and curtains were drawn across it so that nothing could be seen from the outside. Above the roof of the shed there was a window, dark to be sure, but partly open, and this must belong

to a small apartment close to the lighted room. "Shall we try it?" muttered Tom, pointing to the shed.

Rodney agreed with a nod. "I'm game," he murmured.

It was easy to reach the roof by means of an ice chest that stood just beneath it. The two climbed up, careful not to fall through the old and rotten boarding. But when they got to the window they seemed as far from learning anything as they had been before. There was no light inside and they heard no voices.

For some minutes they hesitated. It seemed perilously like burglary to make their way into a strange house by a second story window. Tom put his head in at the opening, and then drew Rodney to his side. They were looking into a tiny storeroom, with a curtain at the other end. Where the curtain hung loosely against the framework they could see light, evidently the same illumination they had caught in the yard.

Adventure had gripped them both too strongly now for ordinary caution. Tom slipped through the window, closely followed by Rodney. On the wooden floor their sneakers made no sound.

Stealthily they reached the curtain, Tom to one side and Rodney to the other. Beyond them was a bedroom, sparsely furnished. On a table an oil lamp was

burning. Two men were at work, prying up the lid of a large box.

One of the men was elderly, tall and gaunt, with a long gray beard. The other was much younger, stoutish and red-faced. Rodney had never seen either of them; they did not belong to the crew of the fishing-smack.

The younger man hit his thumb with a hammer and uttered an exclamation.

"Not so loud, Abe!" said the other. "You're the clumsiest critter I ever did see. Don't you know better than to go squawking away like that?"

Abe sat down on the floor. "Who's going to hear us up here, Silas? Nobody comes to your store this time o' night. And you said your old lady was sound asleep in the front room."

"That's all right," answered the storekeeper, resting from his labors for a moment and standing with hands on his hips. "When you go into business like this you've got to be keerful of everything. Didn't you tell me you thought you heard a motor boat somewheres back of you out in the bay?"

"Well, what if I did? Most likely it was only those young fellers who're camping out on the island. You aren't afraid o' them, are you?"

"I tell you I don't trust nobody, Abe."

"That's because you're a storekeeper, Silas. You just naturally think everybody's tryin' to steal from you."

Apparently Silas Widdicome did not like to be talked to in this fashion. He opened and shut his mouth several times, producing no sound, but making his long gray beard flap up and down on his breast. The man on the floor looked up at him mockingly. "Well, well, spit it out, Silas. Why don't you tell me that I'm no better than I ought to be either? I'm tryin' to sell goods the same as you are. The only difference is that I'm a greenhorn at it, and it's your reg'lar business."

"This ain't my regular business, Abe. You know that as well as I do. It's only what you might call a kind of a flyer."

"Oh, is that so? And what would the neighbors think if they found out that Silas Widdicome was playing this sort o' game? Would you be telling them it was only a flyer?"

"Shi-sh, you limb of Satan! Can't you understand that there's nothing really wrong about this? We're only trying to sell goods that we came by fair enough."

"That what you going to tell the officers if they come

butting in?" The man on the floor chuckled noisily. "They'll tell you not to pull off any fairy tales like that on them. Believe me, Silas, you may be able to fool the folks of Swannock's Neck, but you can't get away with that line of talk to Uncle Sam's men."

Widdicome was pulling his beard nervously. "Those men from over the border sold this stuff to us. I've got their bills to show it. I'd like to know whose business it is how much I paid for it, or how I happened to get it."

"Well, if you'd like to know, I'll tell you, Silas. It's Uncle Sam's business. He's got customs officers and he pays 'em just to keep track of little affairs like this."

The storekeeper exploded. "Customs officers!" he exclaimed, entirely forgetful of his earlier warning to his companion not to speak so loud. "Don't you talk about them to me, Abe Pringle! I won't have you; no, that I won't! Lands sakes! I don't know why I ever put you in the way of making a little easy money!"

Abe grinned. "You were pretty kind to me, weren't you? Sometimes I almost wish you hadn't been so thoughtful. Suppose—"

"Now you hold on. I won't have you supposing.

If you're scared, say so and get out. I ain't afraid of your talking."

The other sobered down. "Oh, I'm not scared. I've got as much nerve as you have. Only you make me kinder cross sometimes." He got up from the floor.

"Very well, very well," said Widdicome soothingly. "Now suppose you and I get that box open without any more talk."

With cold chisels and hammers the two proceeded to pry the boards loose. They had almost finished the job when Widdicome stood up abruptly. "What's that?" he hissed. "There's somebody in the hall!"

"Lock the door, Silas!"

"There ain't any key."

"Put your shoulder against it!"

Widdicome jumped across the room and thrust his shoulder against the door to the hall. Immediately there came a bang on the wood from the other side.

Pringle hesitated. Already the door was beginning to give inward. The hinges creaked, the old wood buckled.

Hammer still in his hand, Pringle jumped for the curtain on the farther side of the room. His head bumped into Tom. He muttered something and waved

the hammer viciously. Next second he fell to the floor, with Rodney on his back.

"Keep still!" threatened Rodney, and wrenched the hammer away.

Tom pulled the curtain in place. "You keep quiet!" he muttered, turning to Pringle. "If you make for that window we'll get you by the legs."

The man, thoroughly cowed now, rose mumbling, and looked into the lighted room.

The door to the hall was giving. One more push and Widdicome was thrust back. He collided with a chair, and fell into it, sprawling.

Two men came into the room, Veedol and Disdoff. They looked at the sprawling storekeeper and grinned at his helplessness.

"You would keep us out, hein?" said the truculent Disdoff, shaking his fist at Widdicome.

Now the two strangers, in their foreign, seafaring clothes, bore no resemblance to customs officers. Disdoff's accent, moreover, was distinctly not that of an American. Widdicome plucked up courage as he rose to his feet. "What do you mean by breaking into my house in this way?" he demanded. "I'll have the law of you; that I will!"

"Have the law!" repeated Veedol, a satiric smile

on his fat face. "Have all the law you want. We saw you down on the dock. You didn't think anyone was watching you; but there was. Aha, there's the box!"

The box was in plain sight; its top-boards ready to lift. Veedol stepped over to it.

"Hold on," commanded Widdicome. "What have you got to do with the things I bring into my store?"

"I will tell you," said Veedol with excessive politeness. "We mean to take those things out with us again."

The storekeeper glared; and Veedol nudged Disdoff and said something to him in a foreign tongue that was evidently mockery of the graybeard.

"Who are you?" demanded Widdicome. "Drunken sailors from that schooner in the harbor?"

"No, no," insisted the polite Veedol, his round face all smiles. "We are entirely sober, sir. At any other time than this it would give me pleasure to relate to you our history."

"But not now," broke in Disdoff, and laid his hands on the cover of the box.

Widdicome sprang forward, still full of fight; but Veedol gave him an unexpected shove in the stomach that almost doubled him up.

Disdoff gave the loose boards a wrench, and plunged his hands into the box. He pulled out a couple of fur robes, beautiful black glossy things, very large and thick.

Veedol stared at the furs; then gave an impatient exclamation.

Disdoff threw the things on the floor and again plunged his hands into the box. Again he brought out furs, brown ones, gray ones.

"Hein!" snarled Veedol, and dropped on his knees beside the box. Now he delved in himself; but his hands produced only a couple more robes like the first.

The two men stuck their heads in the box, while Widdicome stood above them, looking as if he would like to seize each one by the neck. Then the heads were raised, and simultaneously the two men began to jabber at each other angrily.

"Now, you see, you rascals," said Widdicome. "It's just as I told you. I was bringing those things to my store to sell them." He stooped and started to pick up the furs, which were scattered all over the floor.

Veedol jumped to his feet, shaking his fist. "Furs, furs! Where are the other things?"

"There aren't any other things," Widdicome answered. "What did you expect to find?"

"Oh, you—you—" howled the little fat man, his face blazing with rage. Skipping across to the storekeeper he tore the furs from the latter's hands and flung them wildly around the room.

Disdoff gave the box a great kick, and joined his companion. Like Veedol he evidently meant to take out his disappointment on the graybeard. Calling him all sorts of foreign names he jabbed his fists at the storekeeper, dancing around him like an enraged fighting cock.

Widdicome put up his arms to ward off the blows, but was spun round and round by his two assailants.

"Hold on there!" cried Tom. "Roddy, bring that fellow along with you!"

Into the room sprang Tom. Rodney, pushing Abe Pringle before him, followed instantly.

Tom made a football tackle of Disdoff's knees. Disdoff clutched at Widdicome as he fell. The storekeeper bumped his head on the floor, the other two on top of him.

Meanwhile Pringle, suddenly grown valiant, had thrown his arms about Veedol and was struggling with him. The stout man, taken by surprise, and from the

back, was shoved across the floor and pinned against the wall.

Rodney pulled Tom to his feet, and the two surveyed the scene. Widdicome was groaning, and Disdoff lay, completely out of breath, across the storekeeper's legs. Pringle was pummeling Veedol, who was bleating like a sheep.

At this moment a woman's voice was heard in the hall. "Oh, Silas, Silas! What is the matter?"

"I suppose that's Mrs. Widdicome," said Rodney. He stepped to the open door. "Don't be frightened," he said. "We'll have them cleared out of here in a couple of minutes."

Tom jerked Disdoff off the storekeeper's legs and helped the old man to get up. Bumped though he had been, Widdicome was bursting with indignation. He strode over to Disdoff; but Tom warded him off. "Let him alone. Let him alone," he ordered. "We'll send the pair of them packing."

"And who are you?" queried Widdicome. "How did you get in here?"

"Never mind now. Roddy, stop that fellow jabbing the fat man in the back. You've still got the hammer."

The hammer was not needed. Pringle stepped away

from Veedol, who instantly turned round. "So you fellows got in here too, did you?" he said. "You wanted that box. Well, you're welcome to it. We'll get your Mr. Romaine yet. And we've got one of you safe already."

"What's that?" said Rodney.

"Look over there. Look at the furs," said Veedol.

Rodney instinctively looked. At the same instant Veedol sprang past him to the door.

"Hi there!" yelled Pringle, and dashed after his captive.

From a room off the hall sounded the high-pitched voice of Mrs. Widdicome. "Silas, come here this minute! I'm scared 'most to death!"

"All right, Maria; I'm coming." The storekeeper, suddenly reminded of his wife, hurried out of the room to reassure her.

"I guess we'd better keep hold of you," Tom said to Disdoff.

That limber man was too agile for him, however. He jumped across in the wake of Widdicome. Rodney threw out his arms and caught him. Disdoff gave a wriggle, a shove of his knee, and was free. Into the hall he sped just as Widdicome turned from his wife's door.

The storekeeper tried to stop him. Disdoff leaped to one side and reached the head of the stairs. Down he ran, shaking the bannisters in his descent.

After him came Widdicome, shouting to Pringle to bolt the front door. After Widdicome came Mrs. Widdicome, clad in a dressing-gown, a lighted candle in her hand. And after the screaming woman came Rodney and Tom.

Disdoff slammed the front door. Widdicome seized the handle and pulled it open. Mrs. Widdicome dropped her candle and threw her arms around her husband. "You shan't go out! You shan't go out!" she cried.

Rodney and Tom brushed past the pair and came out on the porch. Some distance away they saw the fleeing Disdoff. Veedol and Pringle had disappeared.

XI

THE OLD JUNK SHOP

HAD there been anyone on the village street, and in the neighborhood of the store of Silas Widdicome, dealer in general merchandise, at eleven o'clock that evening, he would have been vastly surprised at what he saw coming out from that supposedly respectable building. First a short fat man, in a blue flannel suit and white canvas cap, came bursting out at the front door and bounded over the porch and down the steps like a frightened jack-rabbit. Almost immediately back of him appeared a stoutish fellow, wearing the everyday clothes of a farmer of Swannock's Neck. He too leaped from the porch and ran after the first man, in the direction of the waterfront. Then, after a minute, came a spry little fellow, dressed like a sailor, who, with doubled up fists, sped down the road as if a pack of wolves were in pursuit of him. After him a tall, gray-bearded man looked out at the door, and was immediately seized in the arms of a woman in a purple dressing-gown. Then two young fellows pushed past to the porch and ran out into the road.

"Come on, Roddy!" called the taller one, and like the three preceding these two footed it at full speed toward the harbor. A most remarkable performance, calculated to make any sensible citizen of Swannock's Neck rub his eyes in amazement and wonder if he were dreaming. But as it happened there was no one about, and the excited performers had the stage entirely to themselves.

The last two runners saw Disdoff turn to the south, as soon as he reached the roadway that led along the wharves. Slackening their pace a little, they compared notes. "He's making for the schooner," said Tom.

"I guess he is," said Rodney. "If only that old woman hadn't got in my way!"

"What's become of Steve? Do you suppose they've got him?"

"Looks that way. I guess the big man nabbed him."

"That fellow ahead's some runner! Hi there, Roddy! Look, he's ducking round that pile of boards!"

"Better be careful, Tom. It's dark in that alley. He might hide somewhere and jump out after us."

This advice seemed sound, for back of the water-

front was a perfect labyrinth of little alleys. The two slowed up. "We can go along here in the road as far as the schooner," said Tom. "He's making for the boat, and if we get there first we can head him off."

"What's your idea?" asked Rodney. "To find out what's happened to Steve?"

"If we can get hold of that fellow we'll make him tell what they've done with Steve."

"Right you are. I'll bet he's on board that boat."

"I mean to find out," said Tom.

At a dog-trot they followed the roadway, past the chandlers' shops, the warehouses, the sail-lofts. They were just coming abreast of the old junk shop from which Rodney and Pierre Romaine had seen the three foreigners when a man stepped out from the shadow and stood across their path. "Stop!" ordered the man, holding a stout stick in front of him.

The man was the big, bearded foreigner.

Tom and Rodney stopped.

"We don't want people round our ship at night," said the man.

"All right," said Tom. "We weren't going aboard her."

"Get away then," said the man, motioning with his stick.

"That's another matter," declared Tom. "We want to know what's become of our friend."

The big man shook his head, as if not comprehending.

"That's a very convenient way you have, not understanding what you don't want to." Tom took a step forward. "Come on, Roddy. We've a perfect right here."

Instantly, however, the sentinel made it clear that, right or not, he did not intend that they should go past him. He swung his stick up into the air, ready to bring it down on the first one that came any nearer.

It was useless to rush at him; it was plainly equally useless to try to argue with him. Tom chose discretion as the better part of valor. "Oh, very well then. Have it your own way. I guess we can manage to find out what we want."

The shipmates turned on their heels, and retracing their steps a short distance came to a halt again. Looking back, they saw that the big man had retired into the shadow at the corner of the junk shop.

"It almost seems as if he was guarding that place," said Rodney. "Let's try this alley. We can get around him that way and reach the schooner."

By piles of lumber, by casks, by old anchors and

chains they made their way through the narrow passage back of the row of shanties. Again they came to the old junk shop, this time from the land side. The place was dark and silent; there was no one to be seen in the alley either ahead or behind them.

"I wonder—" began Rodney; and to Tom's surprise his companion gave three soft whistles, two short and one long one.

After a minute, to Tom's still greater surprise, the three whistles were echoed—two short and one long—from the inside of the old shop.

Tom looked at Rodney, and the latter nodded. Then Rodney crept up to the door by which Romaine and he had entered that other day. Then the door had stood open; now it was shut, and a slight push against it showed that it was bolted as well.

The old shop, however, had nothing of the look of an impregnable fortress. Shingles were missing from its slanting roof in places and there were gaps in the planks big enough to thrust one's fist through. These were not big enough to crawl through, however. But a little search discovered a window across which an old sail had been tacked, and Tom's knife quickly had this piece of canvas ripped away. It was an easy matter to climb through this opening. The two found them-

selves in the dark and tar-smelling interior of the shop, and went climbing over piles of old iron like a couple of spiders.

Then a voice, Stephen's voice, whispered, "Here I am, mates. Sitting on a keg of nails."

The two followed his voice, and found him in a corner. His hands were bound together by a piece of rope. In a minute Tom had this unknotted.

Rodney meantime was peering through the front window. His companions came up to him and looked over his shoulder. Outside was the waterfront, with the bow of the schooner almost opposite them. Someone was walking back and forth in the road, the big man, his stick tucked under his arm.

A few minutes later two other figures hove in view, apparently coming from the schooner. These were Veedol and Disdoff; and the big man greeted them with an inquisitive "Humph?" that was clearly audible inside the shop.

Veedol shrugged his shoulders. In the light of the stars he appeared none the worse for his wild race through the streets of Swannock's Neck. "Ivan," he said, and began to talk rapidly, making many gestures.

It seemed as if he must be describing what had happened at Widdicome's store.

Ivan, the big man, was apparently angry. He shook his head a great deal and kept interrupting Veedol's recital. But thrilling though it was to be so near and watch these strange men, the listeners soon realized they would learn nothing from the foreign tongue. Tom drew his two friends away.

The bolt of the door at the rear of the shop was easily pulled back, and the three stood again in the fresh air of the alley. Toward the main street of the village they bent their steps, winding in and out through the little passages that were like rabbits' warrens. And just before they reached the open road they met a man coming from one of the turnings. He almost ran into them in the dark, and then he jumped back as if he expected to be set upon.

"Hello!" said Tom. "Why, it's Mr. Pringle!"

The man gave a sheepish grin. "That fellow got away from me down here. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"Yes, we've seen him," Tom answered. "But I wouldn't advise you to hunt for him any more to-night. He's got some friends with him."

"I'll go along with you," Pringle volunteered.

When they came out into the open road he turned and faced them. "I don't know how the two of you

came to be in Silas Widdicome's house," he said. "But you saw those ruffians break in and handle old Silas regardless. You can bear witness to that. Silas isn't the kind to put up with that sort of thing. He'll have the law of them. Yes, and so will I. By golly, we'll both have the law of that pair of scamps!"

Tom smiled. "Well, they didn't get what they were looking for," he said lightly.

Pringle glanced at him sharply. "No. And I can't guess what it was they were looking for. You saw what was in the box?"

"Yes. It was full of furs."

"That's all; just furs. Why would anyone be breaking into Widdicome's house to hunt through a box of furs?"

His audience of three made no reply, and Pringle, after a furtive glance at each other, assumed a lighter and more jocular manner. "You might have thought they were after diamonds, or something like that. Did you ever see anyone look so mad as they did when they pulled out those furs? Some things Silas had bought and paid for, and was going to sell to some of his customers. There's a lot of summer people along the coast who like to buy furs when they're up here."

"Where does he get the furs?" Rodney inquired in his most innocent tone.

"Oh, anywhere. There are always trappers roaming about. I don't know very much about Widdicome's business. I'm a farmer myself; live a half-mile out of town on the pike. It just happened I was spending the evening with Silas. He's a first cousin of my mother." Evidently Pringle thought he had explained the furs satisfactorily, for he now changed the subject. "I don't know what you were doing in that storeroom, but you certainly helped us out when it came to dealing with those scamps. I guess we'll let it stand there. Shake hands on it, and no more questions asked. I like you young fellers. If you ever come out my way, drop in and take a meal with us. But I guess you won't be staying 'round Swannock's Neck very long."

"We don't know just how long," Tom answered noncommittally.

Pringle turned up the main street, and the three went down to the wharf. "Only a box of furs!" chuckled Rodney. "I'll bet you couldn't find that box in Widdicome's store to-morrow."

"Well, I think I've got a pretty good idea of what Widdicome and Pringle are doing," said Tom. "They're helping the men on the smack bring furs into

this country from Canada and sell them here, without paying any duty on them. But what were Disdoff and Veedol expecting to find in that box?"

"Ask Steve," suggested Rodney. "Perhaps his friend Ivan, the bearded man, told him what they were hunting."

"All I know," said Stephen, "is that I hadn't much more than left you two and rounded the house on the corner before I ran full tilt into those three foreigners. Ivan collared me, and I want you to know that when that man gets his fingers on you you might as well be a sardine on the point of a harpoon—he's got you; and there's no use trying to squirm free. They had a long confab in their native tongue, which didn't help me a bit; and then Ivan conducted me politely but firmly to the old curiosity shop where you found me, and sat me down there and tied my hands and told me to be a good boy and behave myself. The other two went off somewhere by themselves."

"We can tell you where they went," said Tom. His account of what had happened on the upper floor of Silas Widdicome's house was brief and graphic, but it lost nothing of its humorous aspect in his telling.

Stephen laughed. By now they had reached and embarked in the *Penguin,* and as they left the shore Ste-

phen laughed louder and louder at the picture of the wild chase down the stairs of the storekeeper's house. "But I thought you two were some runners!" he gurgled. "And yet you let that Disdoff and that Pringle get away from you! I wish I'd been there. I'd have shown you how to hoof it!"

The others were laughing now. "Perhaps Widdicome wasn't mad when his wife caught hold of him!" chortled Tom. "He'd have liked to eat those two rascals up. You ought to have seen his face when little fat Veedol shoved him away from that box of furs!"

"And I guess Pringle had the surprise of his life when he found Tom and me there in the store room!" Rodney attempted to express Pringle's feelings by an unearthly groan. "That's the way he sounded, the way a paper bag does when you blow it full of air and then explode it."

It was after midnight when they reached the landing on the Rock. The island was perfectly still; their voices sounded loud as they left the boat and walked up on the beach. But as they approached the path a figure in white came down toward them, Pierre Romaine in his suit of flannels. "I saw the *Penguin* from my porch," said he, "and I wanted to know what had happened. You said you'd be back soon."

"It's a great yarn," answered Tom; and there on the beach he spun it, supplemented from time to time by Rodney and Stephen. "So you see we've got one part of this pretty clear," he concluded. "The smugglers' part. But Veedol and Disdoff didn't care a continental for those furs."

"Of course they didn't," laughed Romaine. "My word, but I would like to have seen them when they pulled out that storekeeper's treasure! Furs! They've got plenty of furs in their own country!"

"What do you think they expected to find?" asked Rodney.

Romaine smiled. "I must beg your leave not to answer that. Perhaps I will tell you some day. But I don't think they're looking for anything that will reach the smugglers' hands."

They turned again to the path, but before they had reached it there came a loud explosion somewhere to the east. On the still night air the reverberations echoed. A gull, startled from slumber, went screaming out to sea.

"Hello! What's that?" exclaimed Romaine.

"Dynamite!" suggested Stephen.

They stood still, listening for a second report. None came. The night grew silent again.

"It did sound over somewhere near that ravine," said Tom.

"It's odd," said Romaine. "If that sign is simply a blind to keep people away, how do you account for that explosion?"

None of them had an answer. There seemed no likelihood of another report. But as they waited a different sound intruded on the silence, the humming sound of a motor boat approaching.

All looked out on the water. Round the point came a boat with a single passenger visible. At a considerable distance the boat sped parallel to the shore.

"Benjamin Craddock!" said Rodney.

"He heard the explosion," said Stephen. "Maybe he got his fingers burned."

Without shifting its course the boat sped on, and shortly was lost in the darkness.

"You've got good eyes, Rodney," said Romaine.

"You see I've been in that boat," was the answer. "I remember the funny noise the engine makes. It's got a sort of a burr."

"And I thought all was quiet on Refugee Rock tonight," said Romaine. "Let's be getting up to the house and bolt the doors before anything more happens."

XII

WIDDICOME CALLS AT THE ROCK

"WE'RE due for a change of weather, lads," said Pierre Romaine, squinting up at the sky the next afternoon. "Wind's shifting into the east, and you can begin to hear the pines whispering to each other. Is the *Penguin* safely stowed for a storm, Tom?"

"Yes, I think she's safe enough. If the wind gets round too much to the north I may run for Swannock's Neck, but not yet awhile. The point and the reef make a pretty good breakwater."

They were sitting on the porch of the cottage after lunch. Rodney, with Caesar lying across his lap, was lolling in the swinging seat. Stephen was perched on a rail, his back against a post. Tom sat on the steps, a pair of field-glasses in his hands, and with these he swept the rim of the distant ocean every little while. Romaine half sat, half reclined in a big wicker chair, and Simmons every few minutes stopped in the doorway as if to make sure that his master was still safe.

"No sign of the smugglers' boat, Tom?" Romaine inquired presently.

"Not a sign of anything more exciting than a string of coal barges 'way, 'way out," was the answer.

Romaine twisted his head, and seeing that Simmons had made one of his periodic halts at the door, remarked, "I say, Simmons, why didn't you guess that those fellows on the smack were smugglers?"

"I fancy it must have been because my attention was entirely devoted to your own safety, Mr. Pierre. I thought they must be in some way concerned with you, you see."

"Ah, you must get away from that narrow point of view, Simmons. I am not the sole centre of attraction in these parts. I daresay that thought will be a relief to your mind."

"It is, sir, it is. I wish that everyone around here was no more wicked than smugglers."

"Why, Simmons, you surprise me! You don't approve of such law-breakers, do you?"

The English servant was quite accustomed to his master's banter, but it never failed to bring a flush and a look of confusion to his face. "As a matter of principle I can't say that I approve of any law-breaking, sir. But as a matter of fact I don't care if

they smuggle the whole of Canada into the United States provided they don't do you any harm."

"Very wrong of you, Simmons, very wrong." Romaine sat up straighter and shook his finger mock-seriously at the man in the doorway. "I should think—"

There he stopped, however, for Caesar gave a low threatening growl and proceeded to climb down from Rodney's lap.

"What's up?" said Stephen, swinging around on the railing.

A man was coming out of the trees at the top of the hill. With slow, dignified steps, and evidently warm from his climb up from the water Silas Widdicome marched across the open space toward the porch.

"Down, Caesar, down," Romaine commanded, and caught his fingers in the dog's hair.

Widdicome halted in front of the steps, and then, apparently recognising Tom, smiled. "Good afternoon. You're the lad that was in my house last night, aren't you?"

"Yes; and there's the other," said Tom, pointing to Rodney.

"And you're the man who's taken this place for the

summer?'' Widdicome continued, looking at the occupant of the easy chair.

''Precisely so, sir. My name is Romaine. Won't you sit down? It's quite a climb to my airy fastness.''

Widdicome took off his straw hat and seated himself in a chair. He appeared a perfectly guileless old man, a shrewd enough storekeeper for such a place as Swannock's Neck, but in no sense a rascal. ''And my name is Silas Widdicome,'' he explained. ''I suppose the lads here have told you what happened to me last night?''

Romaine nodded. ''A couple of men broke into your house.''

''Yes, sir, they did. I dunno what they were after, but all they found was a box of furs I'd bought for some customers. My friend Abe Pringle came in to see me this morning, and told me how he'd met the lads afterwards. It was a mighty queer business.''

''It sounded so, Mr. Widdicome,'' agreed Romaine. ''And have you sworn out warrants for the housebreakers?''

Widdicome reddened a bit, and twisted the end of his beard in his fingers as if not wholly at ease. ''Well, I haven't yet,'' he admitted. ''The two were foreigners, and foreigners are slippery critters.''

"I know. But still they broke into your house and handled you pretty roughly." Romaine looked quite concerned. "I'm sure my two young friends here, Tom and Rodney, would be only too glad to appear as witnesses to what happened last night."

"Very kind, very kind of them." Widdicome squinted out at the sun, then looked back at Romaine. "But supposing they was asked how they came to be up in my house? There's that question too."

"Yes, that is a question. I take it they must have been interested in seeing what you were doing."

"Well, they found out," was the slightly defiant rejoinder. "I was attending to business, same as I always do."

It was clear that Silas Widdicome was exceedingly curious to know what the two young fellows had been doing in his house late at night. It was equally clear, however, that he wanted to impress on them all the fact that he had a perfect legal right to have the box of furs in his possession. If he should imply that Tom and Rodney must have broken into his house as Veedol and Disdoff had done and been there unlawfully then it was possible that the two lads would answer by saying that they had seen the box taken from the island to the village and had suspected smuggling. Unless

the storekeeper could be certain that the others knew nothing of the actual history of the furs it would be unsafe for him to complain of the actions of Tom and Rodney the night before. The shipmates understood perfectly Widdicome's fix, and volunteered no information.

Romaine, who also understood the situation thoroughly, and who was enjoying the visitor's embarrassment, smiled pleasantly at the last remark and nodded in agreement. "Well, if a man is always attending strictly to business—as you say you were—he can't go very far wrong, can he, Mr. Widdicome?"

"Of course he can't. That's what I always say to the lazy loafers who go prying 'round in other folks' affairs." Widdicome, however, was evidently not yet entirely satisfied that those on the porch were thoroughly friendly to him, as his next words showed. "I was thinking, perhaps," he said slowly, "that these three lads here, and you too, Mr. Romaine, might like some of those furs. I've got plenty of them, and I'd like to make you all a gift. Just by way of return for the help you gave me last night."

All his hearers smiled, the attempt at a bribe was so obvious.

"You're very kind," said Tom, speaking for the

others, "but we really don't want any pay for what we did."

"It isn't exactly pay," returned the embarrassed Widdicome. "I'd like you fellers to have some of the furs." Avoiding their smiling eyes he glanced away from the porch. Then he gave a little exclamation of surprise. "Why, bless me, here comes Ben Craddock! What's he doing out here?"

"You and he are old friends?" said Romaine, following the other's glance.

"Oh, yes, that we are. And Ben's the prize busybody of these parts," the storekeeper muttered.

Craddock was perhaps as much surprised to see Widdicome as the latter was to see him. "Hello, Silas; you here? Afternoon, everybody," he exclaimed as he reached the steps. "Holding a little pow-wow on the state of things in general?"

"I came out to see Mr. Romaine about some things he ordered at the store," Widdicome put in quickly. "I haven't been out here before this summer," he added, almost as if in excuse.

"Well, I drop in on him occasionally," said Craddock.

"I'm sorry you didn't come up here last night," said Romaine.

Craddock glanced sharply at him; then hesitated. "Anything interesting happen?"

"There was an explosion down on the beach. It sounded like dynamite."

"For goodness' sake!" Craddock pretended great surprise. "What do you know about that, Silas? Did you hear anything concerning it this morning?"

"Not a word, Ben. You'd be more likely to hear any tales than I would at the store."

It was clear there was a certain hostility between these two old residents of Swannock's Neck. The storekeeper, still fingering his beard, eyed the fisherman suspiciously, and the latter returned his gaze with scarcely concealed resentment. Romaine came to the rescue with soothing words.

"The explosion didn't alarm me, Craddock. As you know, there are always boats coming and going along the shore. Some people may have landed from one of them, and fired a keg of powder for a lark."

"That's it, likely enough," Widdicome quickly agreed. "It's a nice, quiet place along here most of the time. What do you want to alarm the summer visitors for, Ben?"

"A nice, quiet place *sometimes*," Craddock retorted. "Likely it's nice and quiet enough in your store, Silas.

But why is that schooner staying so long at the village? She's not taking anything on board. What is she doing here?''

''What's your notion, Ben?'' Widdicome couldn't keep a note of interest out of his voice.

''Aha! That makes you sit up, does it, Silas? What do you know about her?''

''Nothing. She's got foreigners aboard. Everybody knows that.''

''Oh, so you do know something? I kinder had an idea you kept your eyes and your ears shut. Well, you can't learn nothing from me. I can be like a clam when I want to.''

Widdicome was about to reply hotly when Romaine interposed. ''There, there, my friends. I'm sure we all know Mr. Craddock can be like a clam whenever he chooses. And Mr. Widdicome has the reputation of attending strictly to his own business. It's too fine an afternoon to spend in arguments.''

''I guess I've finished my business here,'' said the storekeeper with an impressive air of dignity. ''You understand, Mr. Romaine, that if I can do anything to please you or your friends here, I shall be very glad to do so. I'm a man who likes to make friends with everyone.''

With a wave of the hand, and a flicker of his eyelids as he surveyed Craddock, Widdicome walked down the steps and proceeded with stately tread to the path that led down to the shore.

"And a good riddance too," murmured Craddock. "Did you ever see anybody put on such airs?"

"He has weighty matters on his mind," said Romaine, winking at Rodney.

The fisherman greeted this remark with a sarcastic grunt. "Pins and needles and such like truck! That's what he has on his mind! What was he trying to sell you?"

"He wasn't trying to sell us anything," Romaine answered. "He wanted to give us something."

That idea, however, seemed so utterly absurd to Craddock that he burst into laughter, slapping his knee, and chortling, "That's a good one! Oh, that is a good one! I say, that is a mighty good one!"

Romaine and his three guests laughed too, although not for the same reason that prompted Benjamin Craddock's merriment.

The joke having been thoroughly appreciated, the fisherman turned to a more engrossing subject. "So you heard that explosion down on the beach last night? Well, I saw it. Leastways I might have seen it if it

hadn't been so dark. I wasn't more than a hundred yards from the mouth of that ravine when something went off up there that sounded like a cannon. There was a roar and a rumble, and things went flying up in the air. I didn't know but what the whole rock was going to explode; so I took to my boat and got away as fast as I could."

"There was only one explosion," said Tom.

"What did it mean?" asked Craddock.

Each of the others shook his head.

"Well, I came over here this afternoon thinking I'd have a look at the place. I thought p'raps you young fellows might like to go along."

As a matter of fact the mates had that morning found the remains of a powder keg at the entrance to the gulley. But they had been able to make nothing of that discovery, and were quite ready to see what deductions Craddock might draw from it. Each of the three stood up, signifying acceptance of the invitation.

"All right. You go along," said Romaine. "I promised Dan I'd give him a fencing lesson. I'll be along after you in half-an-hour or so."

The fisherman started off with Rodney and Tom. Stephen waited to see Romaine begin his lesson with Dan on the tennis court. Dan, though an eager, was

not a very skillful pupil, and after Stephen had watched Romaine make the boy repeat the same motions with his wooden wand a score of times he decided it would be more amusing to follow Craddock.

The others were out of sight as he went along the trail that led by the winding route they had taken the first day. Presently, however, figuring that he could reach the gulley by a shorter way, he left the path and clambered over rocky, bush-grown ground. This brought him high above the beach, which was hidden by screening pines. Through the trees every now and again he caught the glint of sunlight on the water. After a time he stopped and looked out, his eyes roving over the silvery blue ocean. Then he turned quickly; he had heard some movement in the trees to his left.

It was the big, bearded Ivan who stood before him, looking more enormous than ever as he stepped up on a rock at the edge of the pines. And even in that moment of surprise Stephen realized that the man was a splendid figure, strange in his bottle-green coat and red waistcoat, distinctly foreign and distinctly dramatic, intensely interesting.

The man's eyes held a glittering smile under his bushy black brows as he surveyed the young fellow.

IT WAS THE BIG BEARDED IVAN WHO STOOD BEFORE HIM

In the faintest imitation of a bow, he gestured with head and hands. "So we meet again, my gentleman?" said he with a rising reflection. "You were tired of sitting where I left you last night, and so took your departure. I admit that I should have done the same." The words were said with an accent, but otherwise in good English. The tone was polite, though tinged with irony.

"Yes, you've guessed right," agreed Stephen. "I did get tired of that dark, smelly place. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to say good night."

"It matters nothing," said the man. And for a space he regarded Stephen in silence, as if considering what he should do next.

"Well, what's your trouble?" Stephen demanded presently, fidgeting a bit under that scrutiny. "You look as if you had something on your mind."

"What is Mr. Romaine to you?" demanded the other abruptly.

"Oh, come now. I haven't said anything about Mr. Romaine."

"He is nothing to you," the other continued. "You know nothing about him. But I, I, Ivan Levine, know everything about him. He comes from my province. He belongs to us."

"Well, of course, Mr. Levine, you know more about that than I do."

"You are right. I know more. I know all. You and your friends leave this place. You can do nothing here, but bring trouble on yourselves."

"As to that," said Stephen, "it's open to argument. And as to leaving this place, I and my friends are the kind who are more apt to stay the more people want us to go."

Levine's brows drew together, his eyes were not so agreeable. "Romaine and I have something to settle between us. It concerns our country; it has nothing to do with you."

"Now if you would tell me what it is, I might be able to judge of that," Stephen answered audaciously.

"I care nothing for your judgment. This matter has been settled across the sea. We have come here to finish it."

"Very good," said Stephen. "But let me tell you this. When you bring your affairs over here you've got to take account of the people who live here. You've got to play fair. If you have anything against Mr. Romaine, come out in the open and tell us what it is."

"I tell nothing," Levine retorted.

"Very well then. Have it your own way; but take the consequences. I know nothing against Mr. Romaine. I like him, and my two friends like him. We're going to do what we can to help him. And if any trouble comes of it, the responsibility's all on your head."

Levine growled something unintelligible to Stephen.

"I think that's all I have to say." Stephen assumed a look of indifference that he was far from feeling. "Au revoir, Mr. Levine."

He started to walk on, uncertain whether the other would try to stop him or not. For a moment it looked as if the big man would have something more to say, might even lay hands on this bold youngster.

Levine growled again, coming down from the rock and putting himself athwart the path of Stephen.

Then, from somewhere below the ridge of pines, came a cry, followed by several more.

"Ah!" exclaimed Levine, and brushing past Stephen he started precipitately down the rough slope.

Stephen turned to the trees. He was above a cliff. Throwing himself on the ground he pushed forward until he could look over the edge. On the beach below he saw excited men.

XIII

WHEN THIEF MEETS THIEF

IT took Stephen several minutes to understand what was going on below him on the beach. He was near the entrance to the ravine, and at that place a number of people had gathered, and were apparently indulging in wordy dispute. Directly beneath the edge of the cliff over which he was peering Nicholas Veedol stood, his hands on his hips and his head bobbing up and down as he talked excitedly. Stephen could have dropped a pebble and have it land on the head of the short, stout man.

A short distance away stood Paul Disdoff, also talking rapidly and emphasizing his remarks by slapping his hands together. And opposite these two were four men whom Stephen felt certain had come from the fishing-smack, one young fellow and three weather-beaten sailors.

This group appeared to be listening in sullen silence to the outburst of words from the two foreigners. Once one of the sailors started to speak, and another

raised his hand and said, "Let 'em be, Bill! Let 'em be! It'll do 'em good to get it out of their systems."

Stephen thought he could size up the situation. Veedol and Disdoff had been exploring the island, perhaps hunting for something on it, and had come upon the others just as the latter were entering or leaving the ravine. A small wooden box that was resting at the feet of the younger sailor made it appear as if the crew had either been taking something there or carrying something away. Words had followed between the two parties; there was the prospect of a fight.

The foreigners ran out of breath and desisted from their extravagant words and gestures. One of the crew from the smack answered. "That's all very well, maties," said he. "We don't just get the hang of what you're talking about, but it sounds interesting. What we wanted you to understand is that we don't want you around here. This is a sort of a private place of ours, and we don't care to have strangers landing. There's plenty of other islands about. Chase yourselves; chase yourselves. That's what we mean." He made a gesture of shooing chickens, while his companions seconded his efforts by waves of their hands.

It was at this point that Ivan Levine, having raced down the hill and hastened along the beach, joined his two friends. He had evidently heard the last of their opponent's speech, and now took it upon himself to answer. "No one can drive us away," he said. "Are you servants of Pierre Romaine?"

The man from the smack stared. "Servants? No, I reckon we're not. Who are you people anyway?"

Levine ignored the question. "If you're not in Romaine's pay, what are you doing in this place?"

The other laughed—roared would express it better—and looked at his comrades. "Hear that, boys? Hear what this fresh guy asks? He wants to know what we're doing in this place. Pretty good joke that, eh?" Then, with an air of mock-humility, he took off his cap and bowed. "Your high mightiness, the truth of the matter is we were thinking of buying this here rocky spot. Have you any objection?"

Veedol muttered something to Levine. The bearded man nodded. "What have you got in that box?" he demanded, pointing.

"My, my, but you're long on asking questions, you are," was the answer. "I don't mind telling you. We've got bait in that box. We're fishermen. We fish for cunners and whales along the shore here."

This conversation might have continued indefinitely had not a most untoward thing happened. Somewhere on the high shelving bank above the ravine Craddock and Tom and Rodney had been concealed, overlooking the scene at a little distance from Stephen. Craddock, leaning forward, had loosened a stone, which started to roll down, carrying some of the shaley surface with it. The mass came plump at the feet of the nearest of the men from the smack, who jumped back and then glared angrily up the hillside.

"What's that?" he yelled.

The answer was the surprising arrival of Benjamin Craddock on the same spot as the rock and shale. The shelving ground had loosened and he had shot down, rolling over and over as he tried to stop his course by catching at roots and bushes.

The man on the beach exclaimed aloud, "Hully Gee! Look at what's comin' down the cliff! Where did he drop from?"

Again there came an answer. This time Tom and Rodney, fearing lest trouble might befall their companion without their aid, coasted down the hillside after him. More fortunate than Craddock, they knew what they were doing, and landed on their feet.

"It's a picnic party!" cried the man from the smack.

"There's the fellow that ran away from us the other night."

"Any more coming?" asked Bill. "It's a nice soft place to land on, pervided you don't hit my head."

It had not been a soft place for Craddock, however. He groaned a little as Tom and Rodney picked him up and helped him to sit down on a boulder. "Plague take it," he groaned. "I'd ought to have known better. I'm an old fool; that's what I am."

"We don't want to contradict you," said Bill. "It ain't polite. Is there any more coming?" He looked up the slope, and shook his head. "No, boys, that's all for to-day. The party is complete. Looks like this island had as many people on it as there is in New York."

The unexpected arrival of Benjamin Craddock had undoubtedly somewhat relieved the tension of the situation. The men from the smack were grinning at Bill's humor, and the three foreigners, now standing close together, looked less peppery and more willing to be reasonable.

"Now what I want to know," Bill continued after a little pause, during which he had been scratching his chin thoughtfully, "is why you all picked out this particular little island to land on and raise Cain on?

There's about a million more of them between Casco Bay and Mount Desert, and this one don't look so all-fired more attractive than the rest."

No one vouchsafed an answer to this question, so Bill went on talking, his voice assuming a slightly injured note. "We were the first ones here, and it seems to me you ought to be decent enough to go away and pick out some other island. It isn't much of a place, but me and my friends have taken a liking to it."

"The place belongs to Mr. Romaine," said Craddock, who had now partially recovered from his fall and was regarding Bill and his companion with a vengeful eye. "He's rented it for the summer."

"Romaine? Romaine? Where have I heard that name before?" Bill reflected a minute. "Oh yes, that's the fellow the man in the red vest over there was talking about. Well, this Mr. Romaine hasn't said anything to us about moving off his island."

"I don't think he minds anyone being here," spoke up Tom, "so long as they don't try to make trouble."

"Well, those three fellows want to make trouble right enough," returned Bill. "Look at them. Do they look like peaceable people?"

The three strangers, thus suddenly pointed out,

glared at the attention and certainly looked anything but amiable.

"No," said Tom. "Mr. Romaine doesn't want them here. I'm sure of that."

The man from the smack jumped at this chance of enlisting the latest arrivals on his side of the dispute. "Of course he doesn't. Nobody would want such people around." He waved his hand at Levine. "Don't you think you'd better toddle along before you get into trouble."

Levine stuck his hand between the buttons of his scarlet waistcoat; he had a trick of striking dramatic attitudes. "We shall do as we please," he asserted. "If Romaine wants us to go, let him come and tell us so to our faces."

"Oh, he's not going to do that," said Craddock. "He's not worrying about you. He doesn't care a snap of his fingers whether you go or stay."

A dull flush came to Levine's face. It seemed as if in some way Craddock's brusque words had injured his self-esteem. But little fat Veedol spoke before the big man could find his answer. "He doesn't care, you say? Romaine is shaking in his boots this very minute; and well he may too!"

"Oho!" cried Bill, breaking into laughter. "So

you've got something up your sleeve for Mr. Romaine, have you?" He turned to Craddock. "Hadn't you better go and tell the gentleman that these here three high mightinesses are waiting to stick a knife between his ribs?"

"He knows they've been prowling about," said Tom.

"What are they after anyway?" demanded Bill.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "They're plotting something against Mr. Romaine. That's all I know."

"Plotters, are they?" The man from the smack scowled. "Low-life plotters! Waiting to do something to him in the dark. I'm glad you told me. No, we don't want any plotters around here." He took a couple of steps forward, his face menacing. "Now see here. Will you leave this island peaceably, or shall we throw you off?"

Avoiding the direct answer, Levine and his two companions suddenly turned on their heels and walked away. Up the beach they went until they were hidden by the next ledge of rocks.

"Didn't want to be thrown off, eh?" said Bill. He shook his head as he looked again at Tom. "Well, I'm sorry for this Mr. Romaine if he's got those three waiting to do him an ill turn. They look to me like crooks." Then, assuming a very friendly air, he continued. "Of

course you've got a right here. I can see that you're friends of the gentleman who lives on this island. And of course we've got a right here. We're fishing off the coast and we run in here now and then for bait and such things. We did play a little game on the lad there." He motioned toward Rodney. "But it was only for the sake of sport. We didn't do him no harm. There's lots of room for all of us around here, I should say."

Stephen, still lying on the edge of the cliff and watching the scene below him, suddenly rose to his knees. It had occurred to him that perhaps the three foreigners were not leaving the island, but were on their way to pay a visit to Pierre Romaine at his cottage. Romaine ought to be warned of their presence on the Rock.

Getting to his feet, he hurried over the stony pasture that lay above the cliff. Taking a bee line, he made for the plateau. If Simmons was in the house there mightn't be so much danger for Romaine; but if the latter were alone his enemies might make it unpleasant for him.

To his relief, as he pushed through the circle of trees and caught sight of the cottage he found the house quiet and apparently undisturbed. The afternoon sun, well

on its way to the west by now, was already sending purple shadows from the pines across the clearing, and the place looked cool and restful. He stopped in the shade of the trees and sat down on a bed of moss to get back his breath after his race up hill.

He was sitting there when Simmons came out through the open door to the porch. As it happened Stephen was hidden from the other's view. The English servant went to the far end of the porch and looked out toward the ocean, where the distant rim of blue was visible above the dip of the pines. Then he went back and disappeared in the house.

Almost immediately he came out again, this time carrying a large pasteboard box under each arm. He gazed cautiously about him in each direction, then walked briskly down the steps, crossed the open space to the north, and was lost in the path that led down through the woods. Stephen had the impression that Simmons was doing something that he wanted no one to see.

What was the servant doing? Carrying things from his master's house and hiding them? This was the second time Simmons had been observed apparently doing that. Could it be that Simmons was not as trustworthy as he appeared? Stephen pondered over

this for a short time, and then, as the man did not return, he got up and went over to the cottage.

The door was wide open, and Stephen went in. There was no one in the living room, no one in the kitchen. He called "Hello!" There came no answer from above-stairs. Pierre Romaine, as well as Dan and Caesar, was away from the house.

Stephen went out and sat down on the porch. What was it that Simmons was up to? What was he carrying from the house, and what was his object in hiding things on the island? While Stephen was pondering this, Romaine appeared in the clearing. He was coming up to the house from the same direction in which Stephen had come. Under his arm was tucked his rapier in its sheath of dark brown leather.

"Hello, Mr. Romaine!" Stephen called, jumping up from his chair.

"Hello, Steve. Are you keeping the home fires burning?"

"Those men, Veedol and Disdoff and the one with the beard, have come over to the island. They were down on the beach."

"Yes, I know they were. But they've left now. I saw them pull away in their boat."

"You've been watching them?"

"Certainly I have. You didn't think I was going to let you lads have all the fun?"

Romaine stood by the steps, the sheathed rapier resting across one upraised knee. His dark eyes twinkled as he saw the look of surprise on Stephen's face. "I saw it all, all the scrap on the beach; and when my three friends took their leave I went along with them; not exactly with them—above them, would describe it more correctly—and I saw them hop into their boat and row away. I've got my eyes open, you see."

"But suppose they'd caught you, when you were alone?"

"But I wasn't alone, Stephen. I had my Lady Isabelle along with me. I'd have asked nothing better than to have an argument with them, with my lady in my hand." He drew the rapier from its scabbard and held the shining blade in the sunlight. "Tell me, did you ever see anything half so beautiful?"

"Well, I'm glad you didn't meet them," said Stephen. "You'd have been one against three."

"One against three! I shouldn't mind being one against a dozen, with Isabelle here. Ah, my boy, you don't know what a good sword is! I could tell you of exploits with a sword that Homer might have sung."

"But suppose your enemies used pistols or took to throwing stones?" Stephen objected.

Romaine gave a little groan. "Vulgar things—pistols and stones. Yet there is something in what you say." Reluctantly he slid the blade back into its cover.

As he stepped up on the porch Tom and Rodney arrived. They were surprised to learn that Stephen and Romaine had witnessed the happenings on the beach. What they added that the other two did not know was that, after a little more talk, the men from the smack had departed, rowing away to the north, as if to rejoin their ship.

"And the funny thing is," said Rodney, "that they acted as if they thought we were really their friends. They told us not to be afraid of the foreigners; they'd see that those fellows didn't do you or us any harm."

"They talked as if they were just as honest as they could be," added Tom was a grin.

"A pretty lot," said Romaine. "Smugglers! But I don't take any stock in their being able to frighten my enemies away."

"What became of Craddock?" asked Stephen.

"He went back to the village," said Rodney. "I'm sure he's on to what those men from the smack are

doing, but he doesn't want to tell us yet. Perhaps he wants to catch them red-handed and claim some reward.''

They all went into the house. It was not long before Dan and Caesar returned, the boy having been in swimming in a little cove to the west of the island. But it was some time before Simmons made his appearance, and he said nothing concerning what he had been doing. Immediately he went to work setting the table for dinner. Several times, as he moved about the room, Stephen was on the point of asking him a question, something that might furnish a clue to his behavior. But each time the Englishman's face was so impassive that Stephen hesitated. Simmons was not a man to be surprised into telling a secret.

After dinner they sat on the porch until a rising wind from the northeast drove them indoors to light a fire on the hearth. Again Pierre Romaine told them tales of his adventures in Europe. But it was when he related his meetings with famous swordsmen that his eyes shone brightest and his words flowed with the most enthusiasm.

By the time they went upstairs to bed the cottage was creaking in the wind and the first drops of rain were pelting on the roof.

XIV

STORM SIGNALS

NEXT morning Refugee Rock was swept by a northeaster. When Rodney looked from the window of his room he saw great blackish clouds scudding across a sky that was like drifts of snow. Below was the steely glitter of the ocean, ridged into furrows as the gale blew in great bursts upon it. He could imagine the surf that must be pounding on the rocks and leaping up in anger at being barred from the land. Even the pines, hardy sea-sentinels though they were, tough and wiry and deep-rooted, bent and swung in the tempest. As for the cottage, its walls groaned and its windows shook. Luckily it stood low, and had been built to withstand just such weather.

"A better day to be safe ashore than out there on the briny," murmured Stephen over Rodney's shoulder. "Not much fun to be caught on a lee shore in a gale like that. I wonder how the *Penguin's* making out?"

"Tom went down to see," said Rodney, who had

shared the room with the skipper. "There he comes now."

In the living room Romaine was already building a fire. He opened the door for Tom, who blew in on a cold gust of air.

"*Penguin's* all right. Here, fellows, I brought your slickers and boots. Some wind that, and surf jumping a million miles high." The skipper piled sou'-westers, tarpaulins, rubber boots on the window-seat. "There's a big sea running, but the old boat just pokes her nose into it and bobs up and down like a duck."

"Come over to the fire," said Romaine, lighting paper and kindling. "Simmons'll have breakfast on the table in a minute. A hot cup of coffee'll go to the right spot this morning, Captain."

The guests drew up to the table. Simmons brought in breakfast.

"This is a new experience for me," said Romaine. "I'm glad I don't live here in winter."

"Think of the fishing boats out on the Banks," suggested Stephen. "People can say what they like, but I think the deep sea fisherman has about the toughest job there is going."

Romaine made a wry face. "Ugh!" he grunted. "I've seen their little boats wallowing in the sea from

the deck of an ocean liner; and that's the nearest I want to come to them."

"Have you ever noticed the lookouts and the walks on the top of old houses along the coast here?" asked Tom. "That's where the women used to watch for the ships homeward bound."

"I can imagine the joy when a ship put in, and all the fathers and husbands and sons and brothers landed." Romaine shook his head. "But that wouldn't make up for the long weeks and months of waiting. No, it was a mighty hard life the old fisher-folk led."

"It's odd what a lure there is to the sea," Tom said thoughtfully. "Think of the thousands of men who have felt that they must set sail on it!"

"Aye, that's the way new lands were discovered. And where would such a country as England be to-day if it weren't for her sailormen?" Romaine glanced up at Simmons, who was passing a rack of toast.

"Indeed yes, Mr. Pierre," answered the servant, who was used to having his master draw him into the conversation. "But almost everyone in England lives within sight of the sea. It's a right little, tight little island, sir, as the saying goes."

"Something like Refugee Rock," Romaine suggested.

"Not quite so small as that, sir," Simmons answered solemnly.

"But chilly enough so the people have to stir round to keep themselves warm," said Romaine with twinkling eyes. "Never you mind, Simmons. Your people are a great race. And it must be a satisfaction to you to reflect that, although the Vikings and the Spaniards discovered a great part of this continent, most of it was settled by Englishmen. We're in New England, you know."

"It is a satisfaction, Mr. Pierre. And it's a pleasure to me to hear the English tongue spoken so far from home; though there's times, sir, when I go ashore to the village, when I'm fairly uncertain as to whether it's the English tongue I'm listening to or not."

The speaker's words raised a laugh. Simmons flushed. "Begging the pardon of the young gentlemen, of course," he added quickly. "I wasn't referring to them. I'm sure they speak very good English; quite as good as what I'm accustomed to hearing in London."

"There's one for you, boys," said the host. "And

now, if you've stowed away enough food to last until lunch, suppose we look around and see what we can find to amuse us this stormy morning."

The cottage was well provided with books. The outdoor world was not as attractive as the fireside. The shipmates read and chatted for a couple of hours. But presently the urge for exercise grew strong. Putting on their rough weather clothing the three and Romaine went out to look at the surf.

It was worth buffeting the wind on the hillside to stand on the cliff and watch the gigantic rollers come swarming up, their white manes blowing backward, and crash over reefs and ledges with the roar of cannon. In the turmoil gulls flew about, screaming, as if giving commands to the angry waves beneath them. As far as the eye could reach the sea was a seething cauldron. Not a sail was within sight; only the glitter of silver as the sun, piercing the clouds, now and then drew a line on the water.

The four, wet with spray, their faces stung by the wind, made a circuit of almost the entire island. They found the *Penguin* still riding the waves without harm; her anchorage being better protected by natural breakwaters than almost any other possible mooring along the rocky shore. By the time they returned to the

cottage they were all more than ready for the hearty meal Simmons and Dan had provided.

As they were finishing lunch Simmons said to Romaine, "We do need some things from the village, Mr. Pierre. I was intending to go over there this morning, but when I went down to the beach the waves looked uncommon choppy; and our rowboat, as you know, sir, is rather small. Perhaps, if the storm lets up to-morrow—"

"It's a three days' storm," Stephen interrupted.

"I don't mind taking the *Penguin* over," said Tom. "She's a good rough weather boat, and her engine can drive her through any kind of sea."

"Oh, I daresay we can get along without the things," Romaine returned. "You'd get thoroughly soaked."

"I'd like to go," Tom insisted. "Simmons, you give me a list of what you want, and I'll see if Widdicome has them."

The idea of a trip ashore appealed to Stephen and Rodney also, and so, about an hour after lunch, the crew of three boarded the *Penguin* and, with the skipper at the wheel, headed her for the west.

The motor was all that Tom had said of it. The steering was the difficult job, for in the channel through the islands there were many cross-rips caused by

ledges and shoals, and these were now seething masses of twisting, churning water, lashing about in all directions under the whip of the gale.

Great waterfalls came over the bow and sides and fell with heavy thuds on the deck. The flooring was all awash. At times the *Penguin* resembled a rocking-horse, rising up with sudden speed, then dropping down with a pounding and creaking of wood. At other times she seemed to be trying to balance herself on her gunwale, and then her crew clutched at the top rail and hung on until she slanted down again and allowed them to get their footing. Often the engine, in spite of its steady humming, lost all motive power, the stern being out of the water; then again it sent the little bark squarely into walls of greenish water and ploughed through them as if they had been smoke.

The crew were dripping wet; they had to shout to make themselves heard; but there was wild exhilaration in the struggle and all three had perfect confidence in the *Penguin*. Tom's arms ached with holding the wheel, but he kept at the post until he brought his boat past the last of the islands and into the smoother water of the harbor. Then he surrendered the wheel to Rodney, who brought the *Penguin* safely up to the dock.

Ashore, they stamped their feet and beat themselves with their arms, for the wind and the water were cold. Then they went up through the village to Widdicome's store. It was not a day to be abroad unless one had to, and the street was deserted. The store also was empty, except for Mrs. Widdicome, who was writing in an account book at a little desk at the back.

The woman looked up as they entered, and then came forward to wait on them. Tom read off the supplies from the list that Simmons had given him. As Mrs. Widdicome went from shelf to shelf Tom asked: "Is your husband at home to-day? He was over at Mr. Romaine's yesterday, and he asked us to come in and see him."

Mrs. Widdicome turned and peered at them through her thick spectacles. "So you're the young fellows who were in here the other night?" She rested her hand on the counter and regarded them with great interest.

Tom nodded. "Two of us were here. We didn't get much chance to talk to you."

Mrs. Widdicome shook her head. "I'll never forget that night as long as I live! I was sound asleep, and when I woke up it sounded as if there were about a million people in Silas's room. I was that scared!

Of course I thought it was burglars, though we've never had any such people in Swannock's Neck. And then I thought they were trying to kill Silas. I just lay there and listened. And then I screamed. And then I got up and went out to see what was going on. And first thing I knew—here they came running out, one after another, and dashing down the stairs fit to kill! And when I saw Silas I caught at him. He was for going after them; but I held him back. My, but he was mad! But I was going to find out what it was all about before I let him set foot out of the house."

"And did you find out?" Stephen asked.

Mrs. Widdicome looked doubtful. "Well, Silas said they were burglars. He took me up to my room and made me go to bed, and told me those men had broken into his room while he and Abe Pringle were sitting there talking. But why would burglars go up to my husband's room? And what were the two of you doing there when it all happened?"

She looked at each of the three, but none of them found an answer. Fortunately for them Widdicome came in through the doorway from the hall and at sight of them began to talk at once.

"Well, well! So you came over from the island, did

you, in spite of the wet? Must have been a terrible sea runnin' out off Mr. Romaine's place. Well, I'm right glad to see ye. Martha, have we got what the young gentlemen want?" Widdicome was apparently perfectly delighted to welcome the three customers.

"We were having a little chat, Silas." Mrs. Widdicome gazed rather disapprovingly at her husband through her spectacles.

"Chat? Well, that's nice. But maybe the young men are in a hurry, Martha."

"No, they're not, Silas. Two of them was over here the other night, as perhaps you may remember." The woman's tone was a bit reproving.

"Oh yes, I remember." Widdicome came up to the counter, and looked nervously from his wife to the boys and then back at his wife again.

"We were talking about that night." Mrs. Widdicome frowned. "I said you told me those men were burglars."

"Well, so they were, Martha." The storekeeper looked appealingly at Tom. "You know they were trying to steal something from me, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Tom. Tempted though he was to add the word "furs" he managed to resist.

"There," said Widdicome triumphantly. "He ought to know, because he was up in the room."

"Yes, that's true, Silas. He was up in your room; but what was he doing there? He wasn't a burglar."

The boys wondered what answer Widdicome would make to that. For a minute he gazed at his wife, then broke into hearty laughter. "That's good, Martha! That certainly is good! This young gentleman a burglar!"

Mrs. Widdicome positively glared at her chuckling husband. "I said of course he wasn't a burglar. But what I want to know is how did he and his friend come to be in our house."

There was a short silence. Then, to the boys' surprise, Widdicome said easily, "They came because I invited them. Abe Pringle had some furs to sell, he'd got 'em from a trapper, and he had 'em up in my room. And I thought these young gentlemen might be interested in seeing 'em."

"Abe Pringle! Furs!" Mrs. Widdicome exclaimed. "What's he doing with furs?"

"How should I know, Martha? He got 'em from a trapper. These young gentlemen saw the furs in my room the other night." He glanced at the boys, and as none of the three contradicted him he ran on more

glibly. "And it's my opinion that those burglars heard about the furs, and that's the reason they broke into the house."

Mrs. Widdicome regarded her husband with a critical eye. "Well, Silas, that's the first time you've told me that story. Why didn't you mention it the other night?"

"You were all excited, Martha. I didn't want to get you any more stirred up than you were."

"Do you think it would stir me up to hear that Abe had some furs in your room?" The woman's tone was scornful. "You must think me pretty silly." And without another word Mrs. Widdicome put out her hand for the list of purchases that Tom held, and taking it, turned away to get what was wanted.

Somewhat abashed, Widdicome kept silent while the boys paid for the supplies, loaded themselves with the packages, and left the store. But they hadn't gone more than a few yards down the street when he came after them. "You understand why I said what I did to Martha, don't you?" he asked anxiously. "I wanted her to feel easy about it." He looked at them thoughtfully for a moment before he went on. "Of course I know you didn't come into the house to see the furs. I've been thinking about that, and I guess

I understand it all now. There've been some people prowling about that island where Mr. Romaine lives, and you've all got the notion that maybe they mean him some harm. And somehow you thought that I was one of those people; and so you came up to the store and wanted to find out what I was doing. You saw the light at the window and climbed up on the shed at the back. That explains it right enough to me." He stopped to give them a friendly smile. "Well, you saw what was going on; and I guess you know now that I'm not doing anything to hurt Mr. Romaine. I only had those furs for sale. I don't want to harm anybody."

"We can see that, Mr. Widdicome," said Stephen.

"But I didn't want my wife to get the notion that you thought I was unfriendly to Mr. Romaine. That's why I spoke as I did. You understand me now?"

"Perfectly," agreed Tom.

"Well, that's all. And if I can help you or Mr. Romaine in any way, don't forget I'm always ready and willing."

The storekeeper went back, and the shipmates proceeded to the *Penguin*. "He's certainly got himself in an awful hole," said Rodney. "I wonder if he really thinks we don't know where those furs came from?"

"He doesn't want his wife to know," said Tom.

"She's a pretty sharp woman," said Stephen. "Old Silas hasn't heard the last about that little business deal of his yet. I shouldn't wonder if she wasn't almost as good a detective as our Roddy."

The trip back to Refugee Rock was a duplicate of the voyage to the village. Wet and cold, but successful, the crew arrived at the island, and climbed the hill to the cottage. They opened the front door and went in, glad of the welcoming warmth. But no sooner had they stepped into the living room than Simmons and Dan came running from the kitchen.

"They've got him! They've got Mr. Pierre!" cried Simmons.

"What do you mean?" Tom demanded abruptly, staring at the English servant.

"Those foreigners!" answered Simmons. "He went for a walk a little while ago, and after a time Dan went out too. Then Dan came back and said he saw three men on the beach putting Mr. Pierre into a boat. They rowed away to the south. Dan couldn't do anything. He ran back here and told me what he'd seen. I hoped you'd come soon. I didn't know what to do but wait for you. What shall we do to rescue him?"

"I suppose they've taken him to the *William Howitt,*" said Rodney.

"We've got to go after him!" cried Stephen

"I want to go too," said Simmons.

"Well, we must eat something first," said Tom. "We may be out all night. You get us some food, Simmons; and while we're eating we can decide what we'd better do."

XV

THE HOUSE BY THE HARBOR

THE wind howled outside while the three boys ate a hurried dinner. The room was lighted by the wood fire on the hearth and candles on the table, and every now and then the gusts that rattled the window-panes seemed to make the flames of the candles leap and spurt. Simmons stayed in the room, and so did Dan and Caesar. One thought was in the mind of them all: How could they get Pierre Romaine away from his enemies?

The boys ate without knowing what they put in their mouths, they were so busy talking. But the sum and substance of their discussion was that they would take the *Penguin* and see if they could find the three foreigners. Simmons wanted to go with them, and so did Dan. But it seemed unwise to leave the cottage entirely alone to Caesar. Dan didn't want to stay there all night—and in such a storm—with only the dog for company; and so finally it was decided that Simmons should stay too. It was clear that the Eng-

lishman felt his proper place was with those who were trying to rescue his master, but at length he reluctantly agreed to the arguments of the others.

Fed and warm and dry as far as their inner clothes were concerned, the shipmates again put on their slickers, sou'westers and boots. With Simmons and Dan wishing them Godspeed they went out into the storm. In the pocket of his coat Tom had a flashlight that belonged to Romaine. He had need of it at once to find the path that led down to the beach off which the *Penguin* lay.

"It's not likely the schooner would put out on such a night as this," Stephen muttered while Tom was starting the engine.

"Can't tell what they'll do," said Tom. "It's lucky I know the course to the mainland pretty well by now. It's dark as pitch. You two have got to keep a sharp lookout for rocks and ledges."

It was no child's play to navigate the *Penguin* on such a night. Again and again Stephen's or Rodney's warning cry of danger ahead caused the skipper to sheer off quickly; more than once they rocked in a whirlpool of the waves like a chip tossed in the water. But after a zigzag fashion they stuck to their course until the lights of the village showed over the bow.

There would be risk in bringing their boat too close to the schooner, so the three disembarked and footed it along the waterfront. They passed the collection of little shops and warehouses and came to the small building where Levine had imprisoned Stephen. Through the murky night they could make out the *William Howitt* snug in her berth close to the shore.

There was neither light nor sound aboard the schooner. Whispering together for a few minutes the three boys swung themselves across from shore to the vessel. They looked down the companionway and saw a light below. Descending the stairs as far as they dared, they crouched and had a view of the crew playing cards at the long mess table. Neither Levine nor Veedol nor Disdoff was among them.

For fifteen minutes the searchers hunted about the schooner, looking and listening, but they neither saw nor heard anything that gave them a clue as to what had become of Romaine.

"He may be hidden there somewhere," whispered Rodney, "but what are the other three doing?"

"It looks to me," said Stephen, "as if they hadn't brought him aboard yet."

Apparently there was nothing to be gained by staying on the schooner. They went ashore, and on the

lee side of a shed held a conference. "Even a row-boat would have reached here by now," said Tom. "They wouldn't camp on an island in a storm like this."

"Do you suppose," questioned Rodney, "that they don't want the crew of the schooner to know what they're doing, and have taken him somewhere else?"

"That might be it," agreed Stephen. "But where can they have taken him?"

"Somewhere near," said Rodney, and stepped out on the stormy waterfront again.

None of them had yet followed the road beyond the schooner. Now they pushed along it. There were a few more dilapidated sheds and then a fair-sized house, a dwelling it might have been, from the look of it.

There was a light on the lower floor of this house. There were no other lights in the neighborhood, no other houses so far as the boys could make out in the darkness. Stephen led the way up a path of pebbles and climber a high flight of steps to a porch that seemed to encircle the house on all four sides.

The boards of the porch creaked, but the noise made by their footfalls was inaudible in the roar of the storm. The windows in front were shuttered; the light

they had seen had shone through a side window. Around the porch they went and stopped at a window that had lost one shutter. Through the open half they could look into the room inside. They saw Romaine sitting on a packing-box, his three captors confronting him. Levine was leaning against a deal table, his arms folded. Veedol sat on a three-legged stool, bending forward like a gigantic frog. Disdoff, smoking a cigarette, was swinging back and forth in an old, battered rocking-chair.

The house was apparently unoccupied except for the four men in the room. The look of the furniture indicated that the owner considered it of little value and had left it standing about when he shut up the dwelling.

Levine was speaking to Romaine, shaking his head frequently to emphasize his words. The boys couldn't hear the words, but they seemed to be in the nature of threats.

Romaine appeared perfectly self-possessed. His hands were clasped about his knees, and his black eyes regarded the big, bearded man with amused tolerance.

Rodney stole along the porch to the next window. This had both its shutters intact, and both were fast-

ened; but he twisted the little slats in the nearer one so that they opened outward, and found that a part of the window-panes was missing. Leaning close to the shutter he could catch the words that were spoken inside.

To his disgust, however, the words he heard were in a foreign tongue. After listening a few minutes he gave up trying to make head or tail of it, and went back to his companions.

Levine talked, and so did Veedol; but they seemed to get no satisfactory answer from Romaine. Veedol took a pistol from his pocket and played with it. He eyed the prisoner maliciously, but presently put the pistol back in his jacket. Disdoff stood up, threw his cigarette into the empty fireplace, yawned, stretched his arms and turned toward the door. The door was bolted, and the bolt apparently rusty, for he had to tug at it before he could get it free.

"Come," said Tom. "Over the rail here. We don't want him to find us."

Over the rail the three slid and down into a patch of brambles at the side of the porch.

In the dark there they whispered. "If Disdoff comes out alone we might get him," said Stephen.

"Yes. But they'd miss him very soon," said Tom.

"And that would give them warning that we're about here."

"It would only leave two to deal with," Stephen argued.

"But they're armed," said Rodney, "and we wouldn't have the ghost of a show against them. Our only chance is in taking them by surprise."

"Hush!" came Tom's warning.

The three crouched in the brambles, while up on the porch they heard the tread of Disdoff. He was apparently making sure that the house was safe for the night. Presently the sound of his footsteps vanished; presumably he had gone indoors again.

After giving him plenty of time the boys regained their post of observation. Evidently the men inside intended to spend the night there. Veedol already was lying on an old horse-hair covered sofa. Disdoff had found a mattress somewhere, had placed it across the inside of the door, and was sitting on it while he slowly pulled off his water-logged boots. Levine had taken possession of the rocking-chair, and with his feet propped up on a soap box, was smoking a long, curved pipe.

"They've got both doors bolted," said Stephen. "And it wouldn't make much difference if they hadn't.

We can't possibly get Romaine out of there without their knowing it."

"Our only chance is to get him when they take him out of the house," said Rodney. "And it looks as if they wouldn't do that till morning."

"We're three to three." Tom shook his head. "And they're armed. Can't we get someone to help us?"

"We might get Simmons and Dan," Stephen suggested.

Again Tom shook his head. "It's too far back to the island. And I don't like to leave him here. They might change their minds before morning. Someone ought to watch."

"There's Silas Widdicome," suggested Rodney.

Tom nodded. "Yes, there's Widdicome. Suppose you go and see if he can help us, Roddy."

Ten minutes later Rodney stood in the main street of the village. He and the wind had the place all to themselves. Every house was dark, every inhabitant probably wrapped in slumber. It seemed a crime to rout out a man from bed on such a night and at such an hour. But Rodney went to Widdicome's store and threw good-sized pebbles against the window of Widdicome's room.

He had been throwing some time when the window opened. "Who's that?" demanded the storekeeper angrily.

"One of Mr. Romaine's friends. I was in your store this afternoon."

Widdicome peered through the darkness and seemed to grasp the identity of his midnight caller. "What do you want?" he asked in a pleasanter tone.

"Let me in," said Rodney.

"All right. Go round to the store door."

In a few minutes the front door opened and Rodney was facing the old man, clad now in a dressing-gown. Inside the store he explained as briefly as he could what had happened to Pierre Romaine. "Those three men have got him, and we need your help," he concluded.

Widdicome's face, in the light of the lamp, expressed utter bewilderment. "And you want me to go down to the harbor with you now, and help take him away from those brigands?"

Rodney nodded. "We want you to come to that house. And we want you to bring some others with you."

The old storekeeper gasped. "But I don't know nothing about it. I don't know what Mr. Romaine's

been doing. For all I know, perhaps he ought to be locked up."

"You offered to give us some furs, you remember," said Rodney. "Some of those furs we saw up in your room."

"Why, yes, so I did." Widdicome peered at the boy, seeking his meaning.

"We don't want the furs, but we do want your help. How about striking a bargain?"

The storekeeper understood. "Well, if you put it that way—the furs against my help. Tell you what. We'll go get Jim Moody, the constable."

Rodney sat down in the store while Widdicome went upstairs to put on his clothes. They were not to get out of the house without some further difficulty, however, for as Widdicome came down the stairs again, dressed in an ulster and boots, the voice of his wife on an upper floor announced that she was awake and wanted to know what in goodness he was doing walking about the house at that time of night.

"It's all right, Martha; it's all right. Just a little business I've got to attend to."

"Then it ain't burglars this time, Silas?" came Mrs. Widdicome's voice in a sarcastic tone. And immediately she flapped down the stairs in her felt

slippers and appeared in the store in her wadded dressing-gown.

"I thought it was one of those fellows," she said, looking indignantly at Rodney. "What do you mean by taking my man out of his house on a night like this?"

"We're going to get Jim Moody, Martha," said Widdicome soothingly. "This lad's friend, Mr. Romaine, is in trouble."

"Well, what have you got to do with it, Silas? You're not a constable nor a doctor."

"I mean to see justice done," said the storekeeper grandly. "They've come to me to help them, and I wouldn't turn anyone away from my door."

"What sort of trouble is the man in? Has it got something to do with what went on here that night?"

"We're wasting time, Martha. It's a long story, and I can't stop to tell it all to you now. You lock the door after me and go back to bed like a sensible woman."

"I wish there were some sensible men around here." Mrs. Widdicome shook her head and again looked indignantly at Rodney. "I'm going to find out the truth about all these goings-on, and right soon too. You've got to explain it all to me before breakfast, Silas."

"All right, all right. Just you wait till breakfast." The storekeeper gave Rodney a slight shove toward the door. "Lock the door, Martha, and don't you get to worrying."

They came out into the road and went to the house of Jim Moody. This was a small cottage on the outskirts of the town. Widdicome beat with his fist on the front door, and presently a window directly above was opened and a man thrust out his head.

"It's Silas Widdicome, Jim. We've got a job that calls for a constable. Three men from that schooner down in the harbor have kidnapped a fellow who lives over on one of the islands, and they're keeping him prisoner in the old Libby house."

The constable gave an incredulous exclamation. "What do you want me to do? Beat the three of 'em over the head?"

"Well, you're a constable, Jim."

The man at the window snorted and pulled in his head. Shortly afterwards he admitted them into his house.

Again Rodney explained the situation. Moody, a tall, grizzled man, looked as if he were listening to the wildest of sea-yarns. "Well, if they've got him down at the Libby house I guess he's all right now," he

declared at length. "A night like this ain't any kind of a time to go get mixed up in a scrap."

"But they may take him aboard the schooner any time," protested Rodney. "Besides, they're holding him a prisoner; and they haven't any right to do that."

"I can't go down with my gun and clean 'em out, can I?" retorted the constable. "That schooner won't get out of here in this storm. Just you wait till morning, and then I'll come down and bring some men with me. Don't you worry. We'll have the law on those fellows in the morning."

"Seems to me, Jim," said Widdicome, "that it's your place as constable to come along with us and see they don't do him no harm before morning."

"I guess I know my place—and my duty too—as well as anyone, Silas. You go along with this young fellow, and keep your eye on the house. I'll be down as soon as it's dawn." The constable had a firm jaw, and the look of it at that moment showed positively that he would not leave his house until he was ready.

Perforce they had to put up with that ultimatum. Out in the road again, Widdicome said, "Jim ain't as spry as he ought to be. But we don't have many lawbreakers in Swannock's Neck. I can't recollect we ever caught a thief; and as for kidnappers— You're

sure, are you, that this Mr. Romaine hasn't done something he oughtn't to have done?"

"Mr. Widdicome," said Rodney, "you know what those men from the schooner are like. You've had your own experience with them. Didn't they break into your house?"

"That's so, that's so," agreed the storekeeper hastily. "Well, I'll stand by him and you. It must be pretty nigh to morning now. We'll go down to the Libby place and keep watch till Jim comes along."

At the house by the waterfront they found Tom still on the porch, sitting on the rail, his back against a post. Stephen was sleeping in a small barn behind the house. Through the window they could see that Romaine was lying on the floor of the room, apparently asleep. Disdoff and Veedol also were slumbering. Levine sat in the rocking chair close to the table, reading from a small book by the light of the candle.

Rodney told Tom the result of his mission. They decided to take turns standing watch, and Rodney and Widdicome relieved Tom, while the latter went out to the barn to get forty winks.

XVI

THE THREE BEARS

MORNING had come—a morning still cold and windy, with spatterings of rain—before there was activity inside the house by the harbor. Then Stephen, who was doing sentry duty at the time, saw Disdoff unbolt and push open the front door, letting in a blast of cold air that quickly blew out the guttering candle. Ivan Levine, who had fallen asleep in the rocking-chair, moved his great bulk of body, yawned, opened his eyes, blinked, thrust out his long arms, and finally stood up. Veedol hopped up and ran his fingers through his long hair, which gave him a wild, uncouth appearance. Then Romaine stirred, stretched, and sat up, looking about him perplexedly, as if in doubt as to what he was doing there.

Immediately Veedol began to talk to the prisoner, shaking his finger at him and apparently uttering threats. Romaine smiled, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head. He got to his feet and stamped up and down, exercising the muscles that were numb with sleeping on the board floor. And both Disdoff and

Levine added their threats and their arguments to those of Veedol, making a half-circle in front of Romaine, and gesticulating freely and with anger.

While this was going on Tom, Rodney and Silas Widdicome came out from the barn and joined Stephen. They held a hurried, whispered conference.

"Mr. Romaine won't do what they want," said Stephen. "What are the three bears going to do next?"

"Take him aboard the schooner," ventured Rodney. "They won't dare keep him here."

"And that'll be our chance," declared Tom.

"I wish Jim Moody would come," muttered Widdicome, who kept casting anxious glances over his shoulder in the direction of the village.

"Once aboard the schooner, and they've got him," said Tom. "We've got to do something on the way there."

"I shouldn't wonder if they were about ready to leave," said Rodney.

There was too much risk of being seen if they looked into the house now. They left the porch and stood in the path at the side.

"Come along," ordered Tom. "We've got to think and act quick."

A few minutes later the four were hiding at the corner of a shed that was about half-way between the house and the schooner.

Along the waterfront came Veedol, his fat face looking very chilly in the raw air.

"I'm going to handle him," whispered Tom. "I'll keep him away from the others."

Through the huddle of little sheds Tom ran quickly and came out opposite Veedol as the latter reached the side of his ship.

"Hello," said Tom. "What have you done with Mr. Romaine?"

Veedol glared, grinned, shook his head.

"Oh yes, we know that you've got him," said Tom.

Veedol stepped back in the direction of the house from which he had come.

Tom placed himself in the way. He was taller than Veedol, and his face was very determined. "I don't care who you are, or what you have against Mr. Romaine, you're breaking the laws of this country. We call it kidnapping here, and kidnappers are criminals."

Veedol slipped a revolver out of his coat pocket.

"None of that!" said Tom sharply. "Do you think you can hold people up in that way over here? Well, I guess not! If you want to fight, I'm ready for you."

The fat man eyed the tall, slender boy. "You're a rare young one," he snarled.

"I'm all ready for you." Tom meant it; his eyes were those of a fighter. "Come on now. What have you got to say?"

Veedol slid the revolver back in his pocket.

"That's right," Tom said, nodding. "You've got to play fair over here. Now what are you men up to?"

At that moment there was a shout from the direction of the house. Veedol sprang forward. Quicker than he, however, Tom threw his arms about his enemy and threw him to the ground.

In the meantime the three from their ambush had seen Levine and Disdoff, with Romaine between them, come out from the house and draw near along the road. The watchers crept back of the shed and waited until the men, with their prisoner, had passed them by a few steps. Then Rodney and Stephen ran out, and each jumped at the back of his man. Disdoff whirled round, revolver in hand. Stephen clutched the revolver, wrenched it loose. His sudden twist sent the pistol whirling away into the water. Rodney was butting his head into Levine's ribs, and the big man was trying to pull the boy's arms away.

Widdicome was helping Stephen with Disdoff. Romaine called to Rodney.

"I've got his knife now, Roddy! He hasn't got a pistol. Ease up on him a bit." Romaine, Levine's sheath-knife in his hand, eyed the big man narrowly. "No tricks now! No tricks! Get away there!"

Disdoff had edged close to the bank along the water. Stephen and Widdicome together were evidently more than he cared to tackle.

"And now," said Romaine, still looking at Levine, "shall we call this business quits, and each of us go our own way? I think you can make it clear to your friends at home that you did your very best to carry out their plans, but circumstances were too much for you." He waved his hand at the two young fellows and Widdicome. "By circumstances I mean these good friends of mine."

"You are pleased to joke," said Levine. His tone was quiet, but there was a gleam in his deep eyes that spoke of intense anger.

"No, I'm not joking," Romaine answered. "But I tell you for your own information, and to save you further trouble, that you will never get anything from me. I told you that last night, when I was your prisoner; and I tell you it now, when the tables are

turned. Go away, you three, and take up some honest work."

Romaine's words were interrupted by the appearance of strangers, hurrying along the road from the old Libby house. First came Jim Moody, and after him half-a-dozen of the male inhabitants of Swannock's Neck. "Hello, Silas!" called Moody. "Got those fellows, did you?"

"Two of 'em," answered Widdicome, and indicated Levine and Disdoff.

The constable confronted the two with a stern and angry eye. "I hear you've been breaking the law, kidnapping a gentleman from his home out on the island. What have you got to say for yourselves?"

Levine shrugged his shoulders.

"Come, come," said Moody. "Say something, can't you?"

As neither Levine nor Disdoff answered, the constable turned to Romaine. "You're the man they kidnapped; what have you got to say? Shall we take 'em in charge on your complaint?"

Romaine hesitated. "No," he said, "I won't make any complaint. This affair concerns only those men and myself. It's true they're rascals; but I don't want them put in jail. That wouldn't do me any good."

"It would teach them a lesson," growled Widdicome.

"I'm not so sure of that," Romaine responded. "What I want is for them to go back where they came from and attend to their own business."

"Well, I'm sure that sounds very sensible," said the constable. "You fellows," he continued, addressing Levine, "have stayed in this here town long enough. We'll let you go if you'll clear out and keep away from here."

The other inhabitants nodded and muttered their approval.

"But you got to go quick!" said the constable. "On your way now! Right about, march!"

He stepped forward, followed by his neighbors, a determined and weather-beaten looking crowd.

"On your way!" said Stephen, making a motion toward Disdoff.

The two prisoners turned and walked along the road. When they reached the ship there was Veedol, under surveillance of Tom and a couple of boys from the village.

The three climbed over to their own vessel. Along the waterfront were ranged the constable and his fellow-citizens. "Now mind you, don't you come back to

Swannock's Neck!" cried Moody. "If you do I'll put you in jail as suspicious characters."

Levine faced the crowd. "The odds are against us," said he. Then he smiled and pointed his finger at Pierre Romaine. "But as that man has said, there is an affair that concerns him and us." With a bob of his head he swung about and disappeared down the companionway.

"You sail out of this harbor just as soon as you can!" the constable bellowed after Levine's retreating figure. The other two law-breakers had also vanished below-decks, and there being no one visible on the schooner, the constable thought it safe for him to add to his neighbors: "Course I don't expect them to take her out in a nor'easter; but just as quick as the wind shifts a bit they've got to move along. Yes, by golly, they have!"

Thereupon, slipping off his dignified manner, the deep tone of voice and frowning face that he considered appropriate to an officer of the law in the execution of his duty, he came up to Romaine. "I say, old man, what's it all about? Were they trying to hold you up for some money?"

Romaine laughed. "Mr. Governor, or Mayor, or whatever high officer you may be, you have come very

near to hitting the mark. Those enemies of mine are needy fellows, and want me to hand over something to them.''

''How much do they want?'' inquired Moody.

''It can't be reckoned in money, Your Excellency,'' said Romaine, smiling.

''It can't? What do you mean? What do they want you to hand over to them?''

Romaine shrugged his shoulders. ''Only some old things. Some things that both they and I value for association's sake.'' And to avoid any more questions he turned to Widdicome and boldly slapped him on the shoulder. ''You did me a good turn this morning. You're a fine fellow, Mr. Storekeeper.''

''I've got a friendly feeling for a man who's in trouble,'' said Widdicome. ''I wanted to square things with you and these boys.''

Romaine, the three boys, and Widdicome were now moving on along the quay. The constable and the villagers, evidently of the opinion that they could expect to learn nothing more of this mysterious performance, began to scatter in the direction of their homes.

The wind was less violent now, though the harbor was filled with whitecaps. When they reached the

Penguin Widdicome said, "If my wife asks any of you any questions about these things that have been going on, you might tell her those foreigners are after some things that belong to Mr. Romaine. She couldn't seem to understand what I was doing with those furs; but if she thinks it's Mr. Romaine's property that's making all the trouble— You understand what I mean?"

"I guess everyone knows by now that I'm at the root of all this rumpus," said Romaine, as he stepped into the boat.

Refugee Rock still stood in the grip of the storm. It was a real welcome that Simmons, Dan and Caesar gave their returning master. In short order there was breakfast ready, a breakfast hearty and warm for the famished and tired adventurers. Afterwards fresh logs were thrown on the fire and the events of the night before told over in detail.

"Will Levine take the schooner away?" asked Stephen.

No one could answer that question. But Romaine, standing with his back to the hearth and his feet wide apart, smiled at his three friends. "Last night I offered my enemies a fair proposition. I told them that if they would come here I would fight them, one by

one, for the prize they are after. I told them I had duelling-swords to spare. There are a couple of them in those boxes over there in the corner. That's the way that gentlemen settle their differences. And Nicholas Veedol retorted that there are no such things as gentlemen any more."

Romaine looked from one to the other, and his black eyes twinkled. "But there is such a thing as a gentleman, my friends; and there always will be. Those three bears had me in their power, and yet I think they knew they couldn't harm me."

There was no arrogance in Romaine's tone, it was simply a statement of fact.

He turned and took his sheathed rapier down from the mantel. "There," he said. "My godfather gave me this and told me to treasure it. What is it?" He drew the blade from the scabbard. "A pretty shining toy? A splinter of the best Toledo steel? No. It is an emblem." Again he gazed at his young friends, shook his head a trifle, and smiled whimsically. "Your country is so young," he said, "and mine is so old. How can I hope to make you understand?"

"Your country? You mean Russia?" asked Rodney.

"Yes, I mean Russia. And my family is older even

than my country. There were some of them living on the shores of the Black Sea when Peter the Great was marking out the boundaries of his new city in the north; there were some of them dwelling in their own castles when Rome was riding to its fall. And always they wore a sword at their side. And always that sword stood for something more than shining metal. It stood for their honor, for their power to keep what belonged to them."

"I understand," said Tom.

Romaine's eyes still smiled, though his face was serious. "And here I am, on a rock in the sea, thousands and thousands of miles from those Black Sea castles, and these men come to take from me what has belonged to my family for centuries; these men who have neither swords nor traditions, nothing but greed and the desire to take, and to give nothing in return." He stared at his friends a minute. "A curious story, isn't it, boys? A bit of old Europe fetched over to young America."

There was a knock at the outer door. Stephen, springing up, answered it, and let in Benjamin Craddock. The fisherman was very much excited.

"Do you know what's going on around here—under your very noses?" he demanded.

He waited an instant for effect, and then dropped a word like a bomb: "Smuggling!"

"No?" exclaimed Romaine. "You don't really think so?"

"I'm certain of it," said Craddock. "That hiding-place in the gulley; that dynamite sign. And that explosion the other night was to scare me off. There isn't a doubt about it."

"And who are the smugglers?" asked Rodney.

"Who but those men in the smack? They've been hiding their goods here. I've got it on them now."

"Well, I congratulate you, Mr. Craddock," said Romaine. "I never did take much fancy to that crew."

Craddock walked up to the hearth, his manner now more mysterious than ever. "And I came to tell you something else," he said in a whisper. "There's more than that crew concerned in this. I've kept my eyes open. And I've seen someone else hiding things away."

Romaine looked his surprise. "Dear me, Mr. Craddock; the plot thickens. And who else did you see?"

Craddock glanced over his shoulder, then back at the young man. "I've seen your servant; yes, I've seen that man Simmons doing things he didn't want known about."

"Simmons?"

"None other than he. I came to warn you of him."

"Simmons!" Romaine repeated amazedly. "Well, Mr. Craddock, I shall certainly investigate what Simmons has been doing. I was away over night."

"Don't think that I suspect you," said the fisherman. "I only came to warn you. I mean to do my duty, that's all."

"And are you an officer of the law too?" asked Romaine.

Craddock shook his head. "Not exactly. But there's a reward offered. And I mean to get that reward, with what I know."

The fisherman withdrew. The three mates looked at their host. And suddenly Romaine burst into laughter and slapped his thigh in delight. "Simmons a smuggler! Good old Simmons a smuggler!" The idea amused him greatly.

But presently he stopped laughing. "However, Craddock might make trouble. I wonder what Simmons can have been hiding that he didn't want people to see?"

XVII

SECRET SERVICE

THE schooner *William Howitt* left Swannock's Neck that night. The wind had shifted sufficiently for her to beat her way out through the islands, but what course she had taken or where her next port of call was to be nobody knew. She had been at her dock at nightfall, and was not there the next morning. That was all the information the three boys could gather when they questioned the men they met along the waterfront.

Jim Moody asserted that they had seen the last of that evil craft. "I'm not boasting," he said to Tom. "I'm not the sort of fellow that talks big when he hasn't got a right to. But if you ask me I'll say that when those men on the schooner heard me yesterday and saw how determined I was, they made up their minds it was time for them to quit. And so it was. When I say a thing I mean it. If they'd put their feet in this town again I'd have shown them something. This mayn't be a very big place, but as

long as I'm constable here I won't have any monkey business.''

Tom nodded approval. ''I'm glad they got out,'' he said.

''Say, what sort of man is this Mr. Romaine?'' inquired Moody. ''There's enough gossip about him in this town to swamp a good-sized ship. What's his trouble?''

''He hasn't any trouble,'' Tom answered. ''It's his enemies who have the trouble. There's nothing crooked about him.''

''Well, mebbe not,'' said Moody, though his tone was somewhat doubtful as he turned away.

Meantime Stephen and Rodney went up to Widdicome's store to get some vegetables that Simmons wanted. The owner was not about, but his wife was, and when she had waited on them she eyed them sharply, and said, ''Wait a minute, young men. Seems to me it's about time I knew what was going on. What have you and my husband got between you? Are you making a fool of him?''

''Indeed we're not,'' said Stephen.

''Well, Silas and I have been married a good many years, and I've never known him to act so mysterious as he's been doing the last few days. There's some-

thing on his mind." She looked at Rodney. "Why did you come here for him the other night? What had he got to do with you and your friend out on the island?"

"I came to him because I knew him," said Rodney. "He'd told us he'd help us in any way he could."

"But why should he say that unless he thought you'd be needing some help?" Mrs. Widdicome's eyes, through her spectacles, could be exceedingly keen.

Rodney and Stephen each shook his head, not knowing what to say.

"Well, I can tell you something. It all goes back to that box of furs. Yes, it all goes back to that. Do you want to know what I think?" She went on, without waiting for an answer. "I think Mr. Widdicome's been led into some trap. I think somebody's using him to pull their chestnuts out of the fire."

"Oh, I don't think that," said Stephen.

"Well, I do," said Mrs. Widdicome very positively. "He never sold furs before, and I never heard of Abe Pringle having any furs to sell neither. Somebody's brought him those furs; somebody who didn't have any right to bring them."

She stopped a moment, eyeing the two boys as if

to read their thoughts. "I think those furs were smuggled into this country," she said impressively.

"You do?" said Rodney. His tone expressed so much surprise that Stephen had hard work not to chuckle.

"And those that smuggled them want Silas to be a receiver of stolen goods. He's just foolish enough to be tempted some way like that."

"Perhaps he doesn't really mean to do wrong," said Rodney sympathetically.

"Oh, he's not so bad as those that have tempted him," Mrs. Widdicome agreed. "Now who was it did it? That man out on the island?"

"You don't mean Mr. Romaine?" exclaimed Stephen.

"Well now look here, young man. Those men from the schooner were after Silas a few nights ago and they were after this Mr. Romaine night before last. That links Silas and him up together, don't it? Silas said he'd help your friend, when he didn't have no cause to, so far as I can see. And I've heard rumors of a hiding-place over on the island. The furs came from out there, where Mr. Romaine lives."

Stephen and Rodney looked at each other. This was a new and strange turn of events.

"Surprises you, does it?" said Mrs. Widdicome. "Well, here's something more. Two of you were up in Silas's room that night. You didn't come to buy anything from him, did you?"

Their faces, blank of an answer, were a sufficient reply.

"Mightn't it have been you who fetched that box over here in your boat? That sounds likely, don't it? I'm not saying you knew you were breaking the law; but the man who sent you knew it."

Rodney and Stephen knew how baseless were Mrs. Widdicome's suspicions, and yet each could see that she thoroughly believed the case she had made out against them.

"I suppose it might have been us, Mrs. Widdecome," said Rodney. "But as a matter of fact, it wasn't."

"What brought you out to this house then?"

Rodney shook his head. He wasn't going to admit what he knew about Silas Widdicome until he had to; it wasn't playing the game to return the storekeeper's help in any such way.

"You won't tell me the truth. Well now, I've given you every chance to speak up right and proper. You can't keep me blindfolded just because I'm a woman. If Silas has done what he oughtn't I'm mighty sorry

for it; but if he gets into trouble all on account of this, I'm going to see that the folks who led him on bear their share of it."

Mrs. Widdicome gave a positive bob of the head and walked away toward the desk. The interview was over; Stephen and Rodney left the store.

Rain was pelting again; the sky was gray and lowering. With the sting of wet in their faces the boys walked toward the shore.

"Yesterday Craddock accused Simmons of being a smuggler; now Mrs. Widdicome accuses us of the same thing," said Stephen. "Suppose someone tries to arrest Simmons or us; what then, Roddy?"

"We'll have to tell what we know then, I suppose."

"And that'll be enough to send Widdicome to jail. Poor old fellow. I've got a liking for him."

"So have I."

Tom was keeping dry in the *Penguin's* cabin when his two mates came aboard. They were about to cast off when there was a shout from the bank. Widdicome, in an old rubber coat from which the rain was fairly popping like hailstones, stood above them.

"I want to go out to the island!" he shouted. "Could you take me along?"

"Sure thing," answered Tom. "Jump aboard."

Widdicome plopped down on the seat beside the skipper. "Lucky I found you. 'T isn't much weather to row out to that place."

"You'd get there about midnight," Tom laughed.

"A snug little craft this." For a few minutes the storekeeper admired the *Penguin* and her smooth-running engine, and then shook his head gloomily. "Lands sakes, but I've run into a heap of trouble," he muttered.

"The sun'll be out to-morrow—maybe," said Tom cheerfully.

" 'Tain't a matter of fog or sun. I guess it's all along o' my own foolishness. I never had a secret from Martha before, and I'm never going to have one again."

Rodney pricked up his ears. "Steve and I have been having a talk with Mrs. Widdicome," he said.

"Yes?" said the storekeeper. "Was she questioning you? She's a great hand at questions."

"She was telling us things. She's been doing sort of secret service work on her own account."

"Secret service? How's that?"

"She thinks we brought that box of furs over from Mr. Romaine's island and put them in your room."

Widdicome stared in amazement. "By golly!" he exclaimed. "Did Martha tell you that?"

"Yes," Stephen broke in. "And what's more, she thinks we're all a set of smugglers."

"Smugglers!" The word was almost a groan.

Stephen nodded. "Oh, she's got it all worked out to her own satisfaction. And to tell you the truth, I must say that there have been a lot of queer things going on—queer, that is, unless you knew what they really meant."

Widdicome stared at the rain-streaked sea. He looked so utterly disconsolate that Rodney took pity on him. "I don't think that she'll tell anybody what she suspects. I think she spoke to us as a sort of warning."

"It's a warning all right," said the old man. His fingers twisted his wet beard nervously. "I wouldn't have had this happen for a mint o' money. I ought to have asked Martha's advice in the beginning." He paused a minute, shaking his head at the white crests of the waves. "And she'd have told me to keep clear of it."

Slap went the waves over the *Penguin's* bow. Tom, peering through the dusk, was too busy to pay attention to anything but keeping on his course. Widdi-

come was brooding over his troubles, and Rodney and Stephen were watching him intently.

"Maybe it ain't too late," said the storekeeper presently. "That's what I'm going out to the island to see. I told Martha I was going out there, and if it was too rough maybe I'd stay all night, if Mr. Romaine could give me a bed. I can see now that would only have made her more suspicious. Seems as if everything I did now only got me in worse."

"Oh, cheer up," said Stephen. "We'll stand by you. Roddy here is a great hand at helping people out of a fix. He's got me out of a lot."

"Is that so? Well, I'm right glad to hear it." Widdicome looked at the younger sailor approvingly.

"But before I can help you much," said Rodney, "I've got to know all the facts."

"Yes, that's so—that's so," agreed Widdicome. He did not unbosom himself, however, but sat in thoughtful silence until Tom brought the *Penguin* up to Refugee Rock.

The cottage, with its fire on the hearth, its lighted lamps, its comfortable chairs, was like another world from the storm-swept region outside. Romaine welcomed Silas Widdicome warmly, helped him off with his dripping rubber coat, and insisted on his taking off

his boots and drying his stockinged feet at the blazing logs. Widdicome began to thaw, looked less disturbed, and as he stretched out in an easy chair actually smiled at his host. "You'll be glad to hear, Mr. Romaine," said he, "that the schooner's left. "*You're* out of hot water anyhow."

"Left, has she?" said Romaine. "I wonder now," he added thoughtfully. But almost instantly he smiled and rubbed his hands gleefully. "Come; that's good news! What else has happened over at the village?"

"You're suspected of being a smuggler," said Stephen.

Romaine jumped. "A smuggler? I? Upon my word! What have I been smuggling?"

"Oh, we're suspected too," added Stephen. "The whole crowd have been smuggling furs from Refugee Rock to the mainland."

"Furs!" Involuntarily Romaine glanced at Widdicome.

The storekeeper pulled himself up in his chair. "It's my Martha that's doing the suspecting, Mr. Romaine. And I've got to admit that there's some ground for her suspicions. It's my belief that someone's come very near to breaking the law."

"You sound like Benjamin Craddock," said Ro-

maine. "He told us yesterday that he thought my man Simmons was doing something wrong."

"Ben Craddock said that?" Widdicome made a grimace. "So that's what he was up to, is it? I said he was a blooming busybody."

"Well, do you suspect Simmons—or me?" Romaine inquired.

The storekeeper looked rather uncomfortable. He studied the tips of his stockinged feet for several minutes in silence. "Of course I don't suspect you—or him either, so far as I know," he said presently. "But I believe that box of furs that was in my house came from this here island."

The boys, knowing as they did how the box had come into Widdicome's possession, watched with amusement his pretence of innocence.

"You think they grew here perhaps?" suggested Romaine. "But the only animal I know of on this island is my dog Caesar, and he isn't exactly a fur-bearing creature."

Widdicome paid no attention to this joke. "I think somebody's got a storehouse here. I think somebody's been hiding things on this island."

"Oh, you agree with Craddock then? That's what he said about Simmons."

"No, I don't agree with Craddock," Widdicome said impatiently. "Haven't you seen a boat about here? Or any strangers down on the beach?"

"You mean the men from the *William Howitt*—those three?" Romaine suggested politely.

"No, no. Haven't you laid eyes on anyone else?"

Romaine pretended to think. "Why yes, it seems to me I did hear something about a fishing-smack—and some of her crew landing on the beach."

"That's it! Those are the men!" said Widdicome positively.

"So you think they are the smugglers?" Romaine gave a little laugh. "Goodness gracious me! Everyone's been suspected of being a smuggler now—except yourself, Mr. Widdicome."

The storekeeper paid no attention to this last remark. Instead he stood up abruptly. "Have you got an old tablecloth—or an old sail—anything fairly big and white? I'll pay you for it."

"Why, I shouldn't wonder," said Romaine, considerably surprised. "Simmons!" he called. "Simmons!"

When Simmons came in Romaine repeated Widdicome's request, and after a little search Simmons pro-

duced an old sheet that the storekeeper said would answer his purpose.

Widdicome pulled on his boots and his rubber coat.

"May I ask what you're going to do? Is it a flag of truce?" inquired Romaine.

"I'm going to fasten this to a tree out on the cliff," was the answer. "I have my reasons for thinking that those men may see it and come ashore to find out what's the matter."

"And what are you going to tell them?"

"Why, what should I tell them but that I'm going to bring that box of furs out here and let them take it away? And I'm going to warn them that they'd better take the rest of their stuff away and clear out right quick, or they'll get themselves into trouble."

Romaine winked at the boys behind the storekeeper's back. "Well, perhaps that's not such a bad idea. At least it ought to make Mrs. Widdicome feel easier in her mind."

"That's what I want. That's exactly what I want. I'm not going to have her disturbed another twenty-four hours."

"I guess you'll want some help to fix your flag," said Stephen. "I'll go out to the cliff with you."

As it turned out all three boys and Romaine went

along. They assisted Widdicome to tie the white sheet securely to a lone pine that stood out boldly on the high bank above the ravine where they had found the dynamite sign. The flag blew out in the wind, easily to be seen by anyone who might look in the direction of Refugee Rock.

Then they went back and had dinner. Romaine invited Widdicome to spend the night and the storekeeper gladly accepted. After dinner he went back to the lone pine and kept watch over the water to the east. But when he came in at ten o'clock and found the others sitting about the fire he shook his head. "Not a sign of them yet," he stated.

"Maybe there will be to-morrow," said Stephen.

"I hope so," said Widdicome earnestly. "I want to clear up this business before that smart Ben Craddock stirs up a lot of trouble. He's capable of anything when he gets going. I don't want to have him spreading stories about me. And he's capable of it. Oh, yes, sir, he's capable even of doing that!"

XVIII

A LITTLE AFFAIR ON THE BEACH

BY next morning the northeast storm had blown itself out. So clear was the sky, so calm was the ocean, that it was hard to believe that they were the same that had been so filled with wind and rain on the three preceding days. When Pierre Romaine's guests stood out on his porch before breakfast no view could have been more alluring. The pines and the junipers and the masses of low-growing bushes shone in the sun. The sea was a level sweep of rich dark blue. Overhead several gulls were soaring on brilliant white wings.

"On such a day anything is possible," said Romaine. "I feel as if I could swim to the edge of the world and back again!"

They all looked out to a tiny sail that seemed to be beckoning to them from the rim of the ocean.

"That's all very well," said Silas Widdicome, who was not poetic-minded. "But I've got other work on hand than swimming to-day."

As soon as they had breakfasted they went down to

the beach on the eastern side of the Rock. The flag stood out from the lone pine in a steady southerly breeze. No boat, however, was to be seen in the neighborhood. They walked along to the northern point, and from there had a view of the *Penguin* gently rocking at her berth.

Widdicome turned to Tom. "Want to do me a great favor?" he asked.

"Why, certainly," Tom answered.

"Will you run over to the village in your boat and get that box from my house? I want to be rid of it."

Tom nodded. "You'll come along too?"

"I want to stay here, in case those men see the flag and put in. I'll give you a message to my wife."

Romaine tore a sheet of paper from a note book and gave it and a pencil to Widdicome. The latter scribbled a few lines to his wife.

"I think she'll be glad to have those things out of the house too," he said, giving the note to Tom. "If the men come before you get back, I'll manage to keep them here somehow."

The three boys set out in the *Penguin,* and over a smooth sea made a quick run to the mainland. They found Mrs. Widdicome quite ready to let them have the box. In fact, as she stood in the doorway as they were

leaving, she gave a great sigh of relief. "That is a load off my mind," she said. "I'm glad you young fellows, and all the rest of the folks who've been mixed up in this, are ready to do the right thing. Honesty is the best policy, first, last and all the time."

As they lugged the box down to the boat Stephen chuckled. "Well, lads, we know what it feels like to be smugglers anyhow. If anyone came along and asked what we've got here, I'd feel like beating it down to the dock as fast as I could run."

"It is funny, isn't it?" said Rodney. "Perhaps if we hadn't happened to get mixed up in all these doings Silas Widdicome might have landed in jail."

"He's a rare bird," said Tom. "He's certainly made himself out to be the most innocent guy in the world. A smuggler—he? No, sir. Everybody else may be breaking the law; but not Silas Widdicome."

They reached the *Penguin* without being accosted, and set out for the island. When they arrived there Widdicome informed them that the men had not yet been seen. To save the long carry overland Tom ran his boat around to the beach where they had first come ashore. They placed the box on the sand not far from the mouth of the ravine.

It was now nearly noon, and the ocean was vacant of

sails. Widdicome paced up and down the beach, while Romaine and the three shipmates went in swimming. When they were dressed again, Rodney said to Widdicome, "Suppose those men have left? They haven't been seen for several days, you know."

"No, they're somewhere about. I have reason to know that." Widdicome looked wise. "But don't you folks stay around here. You go up to your dinner."

They returned to the cottage. "I guess he does know what he's talking about," said Rodney. "I shouldn't wonder if he'd fixed up that sign with the crew of the smack some time ago. Perhaps he intended it to mean that he was ready to take more goods."

They had lunch, and while they were eating Romaine sent Dan down to the beach with sandwiches for Widdicome.

It was some time after lunch that Stephen, standing on a rock in front of the cottage, gave a yell. "There's a sail!" he cried. "And I think—yes, I'm sure—that's the very boat we're looking for!"

The others quickly joined him. They all agreed that it was the fishing-smack. Immediately they set out at a run down to the eastern beach.

When they got there a boat was pulling ashore from the smack. Widdicome stood just above the waves, beckoning to the rowers. The three boys and Romaine went up to him. "What did I tell you? What did I tell you?" Widdicome exclaimed. "They're the men I want."

The boat slowed up. Jim, who was sitting in the stern, called out, "Hello, Widdicome! What do you want?"

"You come ashore and I'll tell you," was the answer. "It's something very important."

"Sure, we'll come ashore," said Jim. "We're just aching for a chat with you and those three young friends of ours."

The boat grounded in the shallow water, Jim and Bill, young Christopher Wilkins, the fellow who had been friendly to Rodney on the smack, and three others splashed over the side, and grasping the gunwale, quickly had the boat on the beach.

"And now what do you want, mate?" said Jim, nodding and playfully raising his hand in salute to the storekeeper. "Did you get all the people who live on the island out here so's they could listen to you make a Fourth o' July speech?"

Widdicome shook his head. "Mr. Romaine and

these three young fellows are friends of mine," he answered. "I've got no secrets from them."

"Well, I told you they were friends of mine too," said Jim. He nodded and grinned at the boys. "Seems as if everybody likes you."

"There's been trouble over in the village," Widdicome stated abruptly. "There's talk as how some people are trying to smuggle goods in from Canada."

"Bless me! You don't say so!" said Jim. He shook a forefinger at Widdicome. "They aren't talking that way about you, are they?"

Widdicome wheeled about and took a few steps to the box on the beach. "This box of furs came into my possession. I can't do anything with them, and I want you to take them away."

Jim and his mates stared. "Wishing them on us, are you?" returned the leader. "What's the matter with them? Don't folks want to buy good furs around here?" He looked at Romaine. "How about you? Wouldn't you like some furs?"

"Not those," said Romaine.

"Folks say this box was stowed away with a lot of others somewhere on this island," Widdicome continued. "Do you want my advice?"

"Well, we'll listen to it anyhow," answered the sailor.

"Take the box away. You'll be sailing back to Canada some time soon. I give you leave to do as you like with it."

"You give us leave? Huh, that's very kind of you!"

"If you don't want to take it, let it alone," said Widdicome. "I wash my hands of it."

"Well, you're a fine fellow, I must say! What's come over you all of a sudden? Last time I saw you you talked different."

Widdicome held up his hand. "We won't go into that," he returned. "I'm an honest storekeeper, and I don't want to have anything to do with suspected goods."

"Listen to him, boys," said Jim, turning to his mates. "What does this toploftical feller think we are?"

"He thinks we're a pretty rum crowd," spoke up Bill. "Howsomever, there's no good in trying to drive a stubborn mule, Jim."

"I guess you're right." Bill looked at Widdicome again. "Have you been telling your friends here that we're a pack of crooks?"

"I've told them nothing about you."

Jim surveyed Romaine and the boys in evident thought for a moment. "Well, we'll let bygones be bygones," he said. "We'll take the box away." Then he added, looking at Tom, "You remember those fellows who were here on the beach the other day? I saw them on a schooner a couple of miles to the north of here this morning."

"We knew they'd left," said Tom.

"I don't know as I'd say they'd left," Jim responded. "The schooner was anchored in a little cove. She might come back again. Now if I was looking for a real rum crowd I'd pick out those three lobsters."

"You've said it!" declared Widdicome. "Yes, sir, you've said it!"

"But that's none of my business," stated the sailor. "That's your affair," he added, looking at Romaine. "And now, if we've had all the speechifying we want, let's be moving. A couple of you fellows fetch that box out to the boat."

Two of the men carried out the order. The crew were about to embark when Chris Wilkins turned to the leader. "I say, Jim," said he, "you know I told you I was thinking of looking for a new job. Well, this is as good a time as any. I'm tired of the smack;

I think I'll try work ashore. I've got some money in my clothes, and you can send me my things when you get back to Halifax."

"Why, what's the trouble, Chris? You're not going to turn honest storekeeper, are you?"

"I'm going to try something I like better than the sort of work we've been doing," was the answer. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Have it your own way, Chris," said Jim. He shook the young fellow's hand, and then gave the word to pull away.

The boat receded, was lost behind the neighboring islands.

"Now I feel better," said Widdicome. He turned to the young sailor. "Those men mayn't be what you might call bad, but they're not the right kind for you and me, lad. I'll give you food and a bed in my house till you think out what you're going to do."

The group walked along the beach, but they had not reached the near-by ledge of rocks when they saw the tall figure of Craddock approaching.

"I caught sight of those men from up on the cliff!" he exclaimed as he hurried forward. Then he stared at Widdicome. "Hello, Silas, what are you doing here?"

"Minding my own business, Ben," came the quick reply.

"And who are you?" asked Craddock, looking at Christopher Wilkins.

"Never you mind, Ben," Widdicome took it on himself to answer. "He's a friend of mine. Let that be enough for you to know."

"A friend of yours! I believe he's one of those smugglers!"

"Smugglers!" echoed Widdicome. He turned to Rodney, who was nearest to him. "He's hipped on smugglers. That's what he is. He can't think of nothing else."

The fisherman's eyes glowered. "Well, let me tell you, Silas, there's some as thinks you've been up to tricks yourself!"

Widdicome drew himself up, and his glance was withering. "And let me tell you, Ben Craddock, that them as thinks evil of their neighbors is mighty nigh to doing evil themselves. I've seen my duty and I've done it. If there were any smugglers about here they've gone away."

"Gone away!" exclaimed Craddock. "Well now, that's too bad!"

The words and the fisherman's pained expression

were so ludicrous that the three boys broke out laughing. "It's all right, Mr. Craddock," said Tom. "Nobody's breaking the law."

The fisherman muttered something, but Romaine went up to him and slapped him on the back. "Oh, come now, friend. Never mind the reward. You can catch better fish than smugglers any time you want."

Craddock, presently somewhat mollified, accepted Romaine's invitation to them all to go up to his cottage and have some refreshments. Simmons' lemonade and cakes were sufficient to restore the fisherman's good humor, and when the slanting sun reminded him that it was time to be returning to the village he actually urged Silas Widdicome and Christopher Wilkins to go with him in his boat.

Romaine disappeared in the house, but the three shipmates sat out on the steps of the porch. "Well, we've got Widdicome straightened out and we're rid of the fishing-smack," said Stephen. "It looks to me as if we might go on with our cruise again in a day or two."

"There's still the *William Howitt,*" said Rodney. "I don't think we ought to leave Refugee Rock yet."

"I wonder if we could get Mr. Romaine to go for a cruise with us in the *Penguin,*" suggested Tom. "We

could keep him away from his enemies if he'd go."

"I don't believe he would," said Rodney. "I think there's something here on the island that he wants to keep watch over."

"What has Simmons been hiding?" Stephen asked abruptly.

"I don't know," answered Rodney. "But whatever it is I believe it's part of the secret that Mr. Romaine's keeping."

"And we can't ask," put in Tom, "because I'm sure that Mr. Romaine would tell us if he wanted us to know."

The sun had been set for some time and the stars were beginning to shine forth in the deep blue sky when the boys and their friend left the cottage and walked down to the cliff to remove the white flag that had been flying from the lone pine. By the time this was done it was night. They moved along the high ground, the beach below them shining in the starlight where the waves had left it wet. Then suddenly Tom, who was in the lead, stopped and pointed forward and downward. A dory was pulling away from the shore.

"The men from the schooner?" whispered Stephen.

"If it is, they're leaving," murmured Romaine.

The boat pulled out and out. As it disappeared in

the shadows of the next headland Tom said, "Let's have a look at the ravine. I've got my torch."

From the beach they turned into the gulley, and as on the first night they had come to the island they pushed their way through underbrush and trees. Presently they came to the end of the path, and Tom with his torch found the sign. On the wall of rock that stuck out like a shelf was the board with the words in blue paint: "Beware Dynamite!"

Below the walls of the cliff separated in an opening several feet wide. "I'll bet you it's empty," said Stephen. "Here, give me the light, Tom; and I'll take a look round."

On hands and knees Stephen went into the opening. Several minutes passed before he came back. "Nothing there," he announced. "They took Widdicome's warning and got their stuff away."

"Well, we'll take the sign," said Rodney, and tucked the board with the blue paint under his arm.

They went back by the beach to the north, and when they came to the shore where the *Penguin* had been moored they found Simmons patroling the sand. "All's well, Simmons," sang out Romaine. "We found the smugglers' cave empty. We've got the place to ourselves."

"I'm glad to hear it, sir. I was a bit uneasy myself."

"Come, Simmons," said Romaine cheerily. "It's a beautiful night."

"I could enjoy it more, Mr. Pierre, if I wasn't wondering about those three men."

"Well, if they come back, we're ready for them."

"Oh, yes, we're ready for them, sir. I've seen to all the things you told me."

"A good conscience, Simmons; and a trusty blade! That's more than half the battle. Ah, what a night for a little sword-play down on these shining sands!"

Simmons nodded, and fell in behind the others as they climbed the hill.

In the house Romaine turned to the boys. "Will you start on your cruise to-morrow? The weather's fine again, and you must want to be off."

"We will if you'll come with us," Tom answered.

Romaine shook his head, but Simmons spoke up. "Begging your pardon, sir; but I think it would be an excellent plan. Dan and I can look after the house."

"Leave you and Dan on guard? No, that wouldn't do."

"But you'd be safely away, Mr. Pierre."

"And you and Dan would be here in peril. No, here

I stay, Simmons, until we can all leave with a clear conscience."

"Then here we'll stay too," said Tom. "Isn't that so, fellows?"

Stephen and Rodney each nodded.

"Well," said Romaine with a smile, "if you want to see this thing through, you shall. And I've a notion we can settle our scores with the three bears before many moons. They haven't gone. No, no; they haven't gone. You can't frighten bears away as if they were tomcats."

XIX

IN THE SAND DUNES

IN spite of the summer stillness that enveloped the island next day all those about the cottage on the hill had the feeling that anything might happen. Romaine had taken the Lady Isabelle and polished her until she shone like a mirror. He had made sure of the suppleness of his wrist by practising with his precious rapier on the level ground before the porch. Then he brought forth one of the extra rapiers from its case in the corner of his living room and tried his arm with that. He seemed satisfied with his practice and whistled merrily as he put the blades back in their sheaths.

Simmons wore a preoccupied, thoughtful air, and was frequently to be seen looking out at the ocean. The sight of a sail fascinated him, and caused him to snatch up the field-glasses and examine the distant canvas carefully. But each time when he put down the glasses he made no other comment than to shake his head. His very silence, however, was evidence of his alertness.

Dan did his regular chores, and Caesar dogged his

footsteps; but even the colored boy and the dog seemed filled with suppressed excitement. As to the three shipmates, they were constantly on the stir. They made a round of Refugee Rock in the morning, and when they came back to the cottage their eyes were as continually on the patch of ocean as those of Simmons himself.

Nothing unusual happened before lunch, however; and afterwards the noonday sun made them so drowsy that each took a nap on the porch. It was three o'clock when they set out again, winding their way down to the water over the rocky, shrub-grown side of the hill.

They circled the island completely, and brought up at last back of a series of high sand dunes that ran down toward the beach on the north. Here they rested awhile, lying on their backs, their caps shading their eyes; lured again into drowsiness by the warm sun and the sweet salt air.

Presently Stephen roused, and slowly getting to his feet, walked on toward the west. Rodney and Tom followed. A wild hedge made of thorns and blackberry bushes separated them from the upper end of the dunes. The sand was heavy here, shifting under their noiseless feet. Stephen stopped, sat down, and pulling off one shoe emptied the sand from it.

He had laced the shoe up again when Tom's hand fell on his shoulder. Tom pointed and Stephen followed his finger. In the hollow between the high-walled dunes just opposite to them Levine and Veedol and Disdoff were sitting. They were looking out toward the water, their backs to the hedge that hid the boys.

The three mates crouched there, silent.

Levine had pulled off his green coat, and it now lay a little distance back of him in the cup of the dunes. Veedol, his hands behind his head, was sitting propped against the wall of sand. Disdoff was nearest to the open beach, so close to it indeed that the frequent turning of his head from one side to the other indicated that he was keeping watch over it in both directions.

The boys had watched the three for a short time when an abrupt movement on the part of Disdoff caught their attention. He leaned forward; evidently something on the beach to the left interested him.

Curiosity tempted the shipmates. The sand made no sound, the hedge furnished fair protection. With caution they crept along over the rising ground until they came to a place where they had a view over the ridges of dunes.

They saw what had caught Disdoff's eye, what he

was watching from his shelter of sand. Over the beach Simmons was approaching; he was now about abreast of where the *Penguin* was moored; if he came on fifty yards more he would be opposite the men in the dunes.

Simmons stopped and looked over his shoulder; then came on again. Would he go straight along the beach until he walked directly in front of the hiding men? The boys watched, fascinated. What was about to happen?

Simmons stopped again; looked all about him cautiously. Then he turned and advanced toward the bank, to the place beneath the gnarled pine where the mates had seen him stop before.

He knelt down and fingered something hidden by the roots of the tree. He pulled out what looked like a piece of flat board and put his hand into an aperture formed by the roots. He seemed to be feeling around. Then he replaced the board and stood up. Apparently satisfied, he turned and walked away toward the west.

Tom and Rodney stayed where they were, while Stephen crept back until he could look down the dunes again. The three men were all now crouching at the beach end, watching the retreating figure of Simmons. Stephen heard them whisper. Then, after several

minutes, Veedol and Disdoff ventured out. Stephen hurried back to his comrades.

Simmons was out of sight. The two men had the beach to themselves. They went to the roots of the gnarled pine and pulled out the piece of board. They drew out one box, then another. They put back the board and carried their prizes to Levine.

Behind the hedge of thorns and blackberries the boys watched the men in the hollowed out sand. Disdoff had taken out his knife and was ripping up the thin cover of one box. The wood cracked, and he wrenched the board loose. Then, placing the cover in front of his knees, he turned the box upside down and allowed the contents to tumble out on the board.

Gold, silver, jewels; necklaces, bracelets, rings—a tangle of shining ornaments fell from the box. Veedol and Levine stretched out their hands toward the gleaming pile, picked up this and that piece, fingered it, examined it, tapped it with their knuckles.

Meantime Disdoff had ripped off the cover of the second box, and treated its contents as he had that of the first. These ornaments also the other two men handled. The boys stared, wondering if these were Pierre Romaine's treasure, and how they had ever come into the charge of Simmons.

He Turned the Box Upside Down

They were surprised by an exclamation from the big, black-bearded man. Levine was shaking his fist and talking rapidly in his foreign tongue. He was intensely angry, his words sounded like so many spluttering explosions. He picked up one of the chains, flaunted it in the faces of his companions, and then flung it out on the beach.

Disdoff and Veedol took the ornaments, turned them this way and that, looked at them so closely one might have thought they were searching for tiny marks. They threw down necklaces and picked up rings, they discarded these and examined shining bits of glass cut like jewels. Then they also raised their voices in exclamations of rage and disappointment.

Levine kicked the nearer board with its ornaments away from him, and threw himself back in the sand, resting on his elbows. Suddenly his deep voice broke into a laugh, sarcastic rather than mirthful. This angered Veedol, who glowered at him and said something spiteful. The big man only laughed the more. He bobbed his head up and down, as if mocking the fat fellow.

Tom touched Rodney and Stephen, and the three climbed up the hill until they were in safe whispering distance back of a row of pines.

"They found it was only junk," said Tom. "That's all right for the moment. But what are they going to do next?"

"We've got to wait and see," Stephen answered. "They might do anything."

The valley between the dunes was still in full view of the boys. The contents of the two boxes lay strewn about the sand; Levine was sprawling on his back; the others were squatting a little in front of him, jabbering and gesticulating.

Veedol presently poked his head out at the beach end of the western wall of sand. He gave a backward wave of his hand to his companions.

"Something's up!" whispered Stephen, and edged along behind the trees to the left. The other two followed.

Simmons was coming back up the beach. Again he appeared to have no inkling of the danger that was lurking in the dunes. He stopped and looked out at the *Penguin*. He strolled on, nearer and nearer the gnarled pine.

"They're going to get even with him for the trick he played them," muttered Tom.

Simmons stopped, slowly turned around, and began to walk away, presenting his back to the watchers.

Veedol sprang out from the dunes, and Disdoff after him. Their intention was obvious.

"We can't let them get him!" said Stephen, and commenced to run along the ridge. Tom followed. Rodney, glancing back, saw that Levine was still taking his ease, resting on his elbows in the soft sand.

Veedol and Disdoff were running. Now Simmons heard them and looked back. Seeing that they intended him no good, he took to his heels. He raced along the beach.

The boys, up on the ridge, were making good time too. Stephen, in the lead, soon dashed down from the high ground, waded through the soft sand, struck the harder beach footing. He and Tom were outdistancing Rodney, as Disdoff in turn was forging ahead of Veedol.

Simmons was not running so fast now, he was getting winded. But the short, slight Disdoff was a very sprinter, he was gaining fast on Simmons. Veedol was beginning to pant, his arms were rocking like signals of distress. Tom and Stephen bounded along, now almost at Veedol's heels. "You take him!" muttered Tom.

Veedol came to a stop. He swung around, felt for something in his pocket. And on the instant Stephen

ran into him and bowled him over. The fat man gave a gasp and lay with his arms outstretched.

Stephen felt in the man's pocket and pulled out his revolver.

Tom had not slowed a step. He was on after Disdoff. Simmons had looked over his shoulder, and seeing Tom, had turned toward the bushy hillside. Disdoff had veered too, and was almost up with him.

Rodney stopped running. He was some distance away from the others, but he saw that Stephen had Veedol helpless on the sand, and he knew that Tom and Simmons could handle the other man as well without his aid as with it. He was thinking of Levine, back there in the dunes. What might that man be doing? It was important that someone should keep an eye on him.

Rodney went back quickly. He left the beach and followed the ridge where it was shielded by bushes. This brought him at length to the hedge from behind which they had originally spied the three in the dunes. Levine was still lying there, smoking a cigarette, as if completely indifferent to what his companions were up to.

The big man had pulled his cap over his eyes to shield them from the sun. But for the cigarette in his

right hand he had every appearance of being asleep.

Rodney sat down back of the bushes, a patient, alert observer.

Gulls circled over the waves and dropped into the shallow water after fish. The pines high up on the hill began to cast their purple shadows over the yellow sand. Rodney wondered what his two friends were doing, and kept his eyes on the bulky, recumbent form of Levine.

Presently he noticed that Levine's right hand had dropped by his side and that the cigarette was no longer burning. On the soft sand around Levine's feet the glittering trinkets that had been in the two boxes still lay strewn. Rodney felt convinced that the man was dozing.

The boy's eyes roamed to Levine's bottle-green coat that lay some distance back of him in the hollow between the sand ridges. He caught a glimpse of something sticking out of one of the side-pockets, something on which the sunlight at that moment glinted.

The glint was the tip of a revolver, Rodney felt assured. And as his eyes regarded that shining bit of metal with a sort of fascination a possibility occurred to him. If Levine were asleep the revolver might be taken from his coat pocket without his knowledge.

With the utmost caution Rodney crept out from behind the hedge. The slightest noise might reveal him to Levine. But the soft sand was the greatest protection against sound. On hands and knees, and stopping every yard, he proceeded down the bank and into the valley of the dunes.

Once Levine moved, but did not turn his head. His cap still shielded his eyes, and his hands were motionless. Rodney crept on, and then as he stopped again a new idea came to him—he wanted something to put in the man's pocket about the shape and size of the revolver.

He looked about and his eyes fell on a small piece of driftwood, smooth and of about the right dimensions. It lay only a few feet away from him and in a minute he had it in his hand. That bit of wood, tucked in the man's pocket, would feel like the revolver, in case Levine should later clap his hand to his coat without looking inside.

Rodney neared the coat, and its owner still lay without moving. The boy stretched out his hand and touched the shining thing that was just visible under the flap of the pocket. He had been right, the metal was the tip of a revolver. Without making a sound he drew the weapon out and substituted for it the round

piece of driftwood. He was careful to turn the pocket-flap down, so that the end should not protrude.

Levine stirred, and every muscle and nerve in Rodney's body seemed to quiver and then grow taut. He held the revolver clutched in his right hand, ready for emergencies. But the big man did not turn nor lift his head. He gave a little grunt, like a man half-asleep, and again lay still.

Rodney crept back to the hedge, still on hands and knees, and moving backward. He turned a little as he reached the slope, but still held the revolver ready. At last he reached his shelter and again sat down on the ground. His face was wet with perspiration and he could feel his legs tremble. But he smiled as he looked at the shining little barrel and then stuck it in his own pocket.

Levine was still dozing, and although Rodney stayed there for some time longer the big man neither turned nor sat up. Presently Rodney grew impatient. He wanted to know what had happened to Tom and Stephen and Simmons. The sun had sunk behind the crest of the island, and the beach and the nearer water were already in shadow.

He stood up, and noiselessly skirted the bushes until he reached the trees. There he stretched his arms and

legs, that felt cramped and stiff, and wiped his warm face with the back of his hand.

It seemed idle to watch the big man any longer. Rodney glanced at him, still lying in the sand, and then started off toward the west, coming down to the beach beyond the *Penguin* and Romaine's small landing-stage.

He hurried along in the direction where he had last seen his friends. In the sand he found the marks where Veedol had been sent sprawling on his back by Stephen. Farther on footprints led inland; this must be where Simmons had turned away from Disdoff. But in the underbrush all track of feet was lost. There was nothing to tell where the others had gone. Rodney stood still and listened. The only sound was the squawking of gulls and the gentle laps of the water.

The island seemed deserted. Rodney wondered what could have happened to his friends and the men they had pursued. The only answer seemed to be that they had gone up into the woods. But the tangle of bushes and undergrowth was not inviting; there was no point in climbing the hill in that direction. The easier and shorter way up to Romaine's cottage was by the path that came down to the *Penguin's* mooring.

He walked back to this point on the beach and turned

into the path. Then he felt a great curiosity to have one more look at the dunes, to see if Levine was still lying there. He ran along the bank until he could see down into the valley. The space between the walls of sand was empty. The two discarded boxes and their contents, now looking like dull brass in the shade, alone showed the spot where the three men had been.

Levine had left the dunes. There was no sign of him on the beach. But where had he gone? And where had the others gone? Puzzled and wondering, Rodney returned to the path and looked over the sand in either direction.

Then he heard a noise, coming down the hillside. Wheeling about, he caught sight of Caesar. The dog came bounding up, yelping and wagging his tail in great excitement.

"What do you want, old fellow?" Rodney asked.

Caesar turned and pointed his nose up the path in the direction of Romaine's cottage.

"Want me to come to your master?"

The dog barked, and his head and tail again showed his excitement.

"Yes. That's what you want. All right, old fellow. We'll go up and lend a hand."

XX

STAND AND DELIVER!

THE path that led up the hill was steep and set with many rocky ledges, but Rodney covered it at surprising speed. At first Caesar went before him, keeping quiet in order to save his breath, but presently the dog fell behind; and so it was Rodney who came first to the little grove of pines that guarded the northern end of the open ground that stretched in front of the cottage.

What he saw made him stare, amazed. His first impulse was to run past the trees into the open space. His next was to get a better grasp of the situation before he interfered.

Pierre Romaine, dressed as Rodney had first seen him, in riding-breeches and open-throated white shirt, stood with his rapier in his hand, regarding with a smile the tall, heavy, black-bearded Levine. So great was the difference in size that Romaine appeared almost like David confronting the giant Goliath. In Levine's right hand was a piece of wood, the very same piece that Rodney had concealed in the man's pocket.

"Throw it away," Rodney heard Romaine say. "It might do to attack flies; but it's useless against a man. Come, Monsieur Levine, throw it away."

The other man dropped the piece of wood, and clenched his great fist.

"That's better, monsieur; much better," said Romaine with a nod. "But even the fist is not the best weapon with which gentlemen may settle their disputes." He tapped the hilt of his rapier with his fingers. "This is it, monsieur."

Levine muttered something in Russian.

"Indeed yes, that is so," agreed Romaine. He was speaking in English, perhaps with the notion of teasing his adversary. "But, you see, I can provide you. I have—"

At this moment Caesar, not so patient as Rodney, rushed upon the scene, barking and waving his tail in jubilation. He rubbed against Romaine's legs.

"Quiet, be quiet, Caesar!" commanded his master. "We can attend to this matter without your aid. We want no interference from partisans on either side."

The dog slunk away, lying down on the grass near the cottage.

Rodney stood in the grove, waiting to see what would happen.

"As I was saying," Romaine resumed; "I can provide you, monsieur." With a quick step he turned to the porch and picked up the second rapier that was lying there.

As he turned Levine sprang forward, fist upraised.

Instantly Romaine had whirled around again, and now he presented the points of the two swords directly at Levine's chest. "Back, monsieur, back; or I'll spit you like a goose!"

The big man fell back a step, again exclaiming in Russian.

"Further, further; out to the level stretch there." And with the points of the rapiers as an inducement Romaine urged his enemy over to the ground where they were standing when Rodney first saw them.

"Now," said Romaine, again smiling, "I'm sure you regret that unworthy attempt to take me off my guard. I prefer to think of my enemies as honorable, no matter how much we may differ in our opinions. You look like a man who enjoys the thrill of combat." He turned the hilt of the second rapier toward Levine. "You want to fight me? Well, I offer you the best of opportunity."

Levine stood sullen, frowning, his fingers gripping the edges of his green coat.

"Don't you want to fight? Very well." Romaine threw the rapier on the grass, its hilt not very far from Levine's feet.

Still the big man stood there, a good foot taller than the man in the white shirt.

Romaine had the tip of his own rapier resting on his boot. "Did you think that I came to this island because I was afraid of you and your friends? If you did, our talk that night at the house on shore should have corrected your error. I am always ready to meet you and to fight you fairly. You will pardon me if I say that it begins to look to me as if you didn't care to taste your own medicine."

Levine gave a growl, and stooping, snatched up the rapier from the ground.

"Ah, that's more like it, monsieur," said Romaine quickly. "Have you ever had such a thing in your hand before?"

"Yes!" cried the other, stung at last into speaking in English. "Often I have! And I've fought better men than you!"

"Better and better, monsieur!" Romaine exclaimed in a tone that indicated the greatest delight. "I admire the experienced hand."

For the first time the big man smiled, baring his

white teeth. "I, Ivan Levine, have fought with every weapon! I will show you, monsieur."

Next minute the two were at it; and almost as quick as the shining blades had touched in salutation Rodney realized that Levine knew how to handle a rapier. He was not so alert as Romaine, who was in fact quicker than the eye, but he was alert enough to guard himself, and his greater height gave him a longer reach.

Caesar stirred and stood up; but he was too much accustomed to seeing his master practice with the foil or give a fencing lesson to Dan for him to interfere now. As for Rodney, he clutched the nearest branch of a pine; but otherwise made no movement; he understood that Romaine had deliberately sought this test with his enemy and would not thank anyone who interrupted.

There was no doubting the earnestness with which the bearded man was pressing the attack. He meant to win out now and settle with Romaine. He took no rash chances, his guard was well-nigh perfect, and as one or the other shifted ground or made around in a circle Levine's footing was surprisingly light and quick for a man of his size.

His coat was a handicap, however. Its tails would flap and the sleeves hampered his arms. "One mo-

ment!" cried Romaine. "Throw off your coat, monsieur!"

The blades shivered against each other, and then the points dropped. Levine let his rapier fall to the ground and flung off the bottle-green coat. He rolled up his sleeves, caught his weapon again, and stood at attention in his red waistcoat.

He was even more agile now. Time and again he lunged like forked lighting, only missing the white shirt of Romaine by a scant inch or so. But Romaine was swift, his wrist, his arm, his feet were absolutely tireless. His eyes showed that he realized his enemy was not to be held lightly; Levine was dangerous, one slip on Romaine's part and the other would have him.

The bearded man was dripping wet; he pressed the battle, knowing he must be quick. For an instant the thrusts and parries were simply a glitter before Rodney's eyes. He thought Romaine must be caught, his enemy was so fierce. Then suddenly there was a flash of Romaine's wrist and Levine's rapier went spinning from his hand.

Romaine lowered his point from his enemy's red waistcoat. He stood back a step. "Well, monsier?" he inquired.

Levine let his hands open at his side. "You have me," he said. "What do you want of me?"

"To go back to your home."

Levine swept the sweat from his brow with his arm. "You are a great fighter, monsieur. I feel no shame at having to yield to you."

"That is well spoken," said Romaine. He drew a handkerchief from his breeches' pocket and touched his rapier with it. "My lady here has never failed me yet. She is the most perfect thing I know." Then he looked up and nodded at the other. "If you will take a seat on my porch, Monsieur Levine, we can await developments more comfortably."

The bearded man appeared doubtful for a moment; then he also nodded and smiled. "It seems that I must," he said.

"The wise man always does what he must," observed Romaine.

Levine picked up his coat and walked over to the porch.

Rodney came out from the grove, and Caesar gave him a loud yelp of welcome. "I saw it all!" cried Rodney, his eyes on Romaine.

"A very fine passage at arms," said the latter. "What's become of Steve and Tom?"

"I thought they'd be here," was the answer. "I haven't seen them for over an hour."

Levine on the porch, the other two seated on a rock in the open space, waited. After a while Dan appeared from the woods. He gave his message in great excitement. Simmons wanted Mr. Romaine to go down to the beach on the western side immediately; it was of the utmost importance.

"Well," said Romaine, "we'll come. But I think we'll all have to go. Monsieur Levine, we're wanted down on the beach. Are you sufficiently rested?"

Dan led the way, Caesar rubbing against his legs; then came Levine, followed by Romaine, his rapier in his hand; and last of all Rodney. When they came out on the shore Rodney saw, to his surprise, a considerable group. Disdoff and Veedol were standing down by the water, with Jim Moody and Abe Pringle apparently guarding them. At a little distance were Tom, Stephen, Simmons and Silas Widdicome.

The latter group came up to Romaine at once. "So you've got the other, Mister Pierre, have you?" Simmons said. "That makes a clean bag of them." He pointed to Veedol and Disdoff. "With Mr. Tom's help I was able to capture the thin one, and Mr. Stephen accounted for the fat one."

"He got pretty well jarred," put in Stephen.

"Yes, Simmons, I see," said Romaine. "But Mr. Widdicome and the other two men?"

"After we bagged those fellows," explained Simmons, "we had quite a discussion about them—what we should do with them, I mean, sir. Should we take them up to the house? That seemed rather dangerous; they might manage to give us the slip. So finally we hit on the plan of having Mr. Tom go over to the village in his boat and get the constable. Mr. Stephen and I watched the prisoners; Mr. Stephen had taken the pistol from the fat one, and the thin one wasn't armed. And Mr. Tom came back with the constable and two friends. We've given our men into the constable's charge, sir."

"And what will happen to them?" asked Romaine.

"Jim Moody says he can have them sent back to Europe as undesirables," spoke up Widdicome. "He's got plenty of evidence against them."

"They certainly are undesirables," said Simmons, looking at his master.

"Oh, yes, they're all of that," agreed Romaine.

"Breaking into my house," said Widdicome, "and treating me something shameful. We don't want them in the United States any longer."

"Well, so be it," said Romaine. "This is your country, and if you don't want them here, why, it's your right to see that they don't stay." He looked at Levine. "Will you go back home with your companions? It's your best course, it seems to me."

For answer Levine, thrusting his hands in his pockets, walked across the beach to his two mates.

It was not long afterwards that the *Penguin,* with Tom and Stephen, the three Russians, Widdicome, Moody and Pringle aboard, set out from Refugee Rock. Back of her she towed the small boat in which the foreigners had reached the island, and which Stephen had discovered in a little rock-bound harbor on the northwestern shore. The *Penguin* headed directly for Swannock's Neck.

The others walked across the beach to the path where Caesar had come running down to summon help for his master. Ahead of them were the sand dunes, and Dan's eye caught sight of some of the discarded contents of the two boxes. He pointed these out, and they all went up to them.

For the first time since Rodney had known him Simmons burst into a resounding laugh. "You must admit, Mr. Pierre," he said between shakes of amusement, "that I had my sport with them over those hid-

den treasures. "Look." He stooped and picked up brass chains, brass curtain-rings, pieces of colored glass, the odds and ends that might have been found in a junk shop. "Here we have gold and jewels, precious stones, the heirlooms of your house!"

"Did you mean the men to find them?" asked Rodney.

"I got all I could from the village," answered Simmons, "and I hid them in various places. Yes, I hoped they would find them. I wanted to have some fun with them. Those three were looking for treasure; and I didn't want them to be disappointed."

"I wish you could have seen them when they poured that stuff out on the sand!" said Rodney. And he told the others what he had witnessed from his hiding-place.

Presently they returned to the cottage. Simmons and Dan went indoors to prepare dinner; Romaine and Rodney sat on the steps of the porch. Caesar, his head stretched along his paws, lay at Rodney's feet, blinking sleepily at the sunset behind the trees.

"It turned out all right," said Romaine thoughtfully, "but there was danger in it. They'd never have got what they came after; but they might have got me. They were afraid to put me out of the way, for if they

did, they didn't see how they'd be able to locate the treasure. It was touch and go more than once in that fight whether Levine wouldn't run me through with his rapier."

"He's a powerful man," said Rodney.

"He's a fine fencer," added Romaine.

"Here's his revolver," said Rodney, taking the weapon from his pocket. He told how he came to have it.

"If those three would only use their brains to some good purpose!" exclaimed Romaine. "But that's the way with some fellows; they seem made to run wild."

They were still chatting when Tom and Stephen arrived. "Moody's got them safe," Tom reported. "It's a good day's work."

"And now," cried Stephen. "We've got nothing to do but eat and enjoy ourselves until to-morrow!"

They did an enormous amount of eating that evening. Simmons had provided a very splendid dinner in honor of the occasion, and the sky was already star lit before they left the table for the porch. "You've done a fine job, boys," said Romaine. "You were looking for adventure and you got it."

"Roddy was looking for it," put in Stephen. "He's always looking for it. He told me that first night here

that he was never so thrilled in his life as when he heard that pistol shot on the beach in the dark. He was tickled to death."

"The shot the smugglers fired to warn us away," said Tom. "It's funny that the smugglers and the Russians should both have lighted on the same place—and not such a very big place at that."

"I think there must be something about you that draws exciting things your way," Rodney suggested, looking at Romaine.

The man laughed and nodded. "Perhaps there is, Roddy. I've always had my share of thrills. But I was born into a family that's famous for adventures. My father was a prince—Spiridoff is the name."

"Then you're a prince too," said Stephen.

"Not so loud," Romaine said jokingly. "Princes aren't very popular at present. I took my mother's name when I crossed the ocean; Romaine, just Pierre Romaine is good enough for me. But I brought some of the Spiridoff heirlooms with me. That's what our greedy friends were after." He drummed with his fingers on the arm of his chair. "I might have put them in a safe deposit box in one of the cities, of course. But that didn't appeal to me. I preferred to have the defending of them myself. A foolish idea

perhaps, but then, like Roddy here, I cherish the sense of adventure. So I brought them out to the island, and I hid them. Those three would never have got a glimpse of them."

He stopped and looked at each of his friends with his quizzical smile. "I know what you're each thinking—you're wishing you might have a look at them. Well, you deserve it. I'll show you the real treasure to-morrow."

XXI

COMRADES FOUR

IT was after breakfast next morning that Romaine said to his guests: "Who wants to go treasure hunting? All those who'd like to, please rise."

The three boys rose as one.

"It seems to be a pretty popular sport in America," Romaine observed, pretending to look surprised. "I suppose you inherit that taste from the days when pirates and buccaneers used to stop in at all the summer resorts along the coast and make things lively for the guests. Well, if you feel that way about it I'll lead you to it. But first lift your right hands and promise you'll never tell anyone where my treasure is hid."

The three raised their hands and solemnly promised.

"Good enough. Simmons is the only other person who knows, and I'd trust Simmons even with my Lady Isabelle. You'll admit that means a great deal when you remember how I feel about my wonderful rapier. Well, you won't need swords or pistols or even spades on this hunt. Just follow the leader."

He led them out of the house and around the porch to the northern end. Here there was a latticed door into the space between the ground and the planks of the porch. Opening this, they went in. Wood for the fire was piled here. The ground sloped and the roof was so low that in places they had to stoop to keep from bumping their heads against the supporting beams. Romaine led them to the opposite end, which had no door, but only the latticed wall.

"Now," he said, "I'll show you a hiding-place of my own devising."

Against the latticed end three posts, cut square, held the boards of the porch. One was next to the foundations of the cottage, one at the outer edge of the porch, and the third rose half-way between. And running horizontally across these uprights was a beam, about eight inches square. It looked as if it was solid, and Romaine rapped upon it with his knuckles to show that it was tightly wedged in place.

Then he pulled a small peg from the under side of this beam at the end near the outer edge of the porch. That done, he exerted a little pressure on the beam with his fingers, and after a minute swung one half of it loose, down toward the ground. The wood was so cleverly dovetailed, and the hinges so completely hid-

den on the under side that no one would have supposed that the beam was in reality made of two pieces and that one would drop like the door of a chest.

The three mates watched with absorbed attention while Romaine pulled out half-a-dozen more small pegs and then lifted from the hollow beam a long tin box, japanned and painted black. He placed this carefully on top of a barrel, and with a key on the end of his watch-chain unlocked it. Lifting the lid, he nodded. "There are the things I carried away with me from the old castle on the Black Sea."

The boys stared as Romaine picked up one object after another and held each in turn for them to see. There were rings set with rubies and emeralds, diamonds, sapphires and other wonderful stones, there were necklaces made entirely of these precious gems, there were pendents and bracelets, there were stars of Russian orders of knighthood encrusted with jewels, there was filagree work in gold of old and marvellous craftsmanship.

Little as the three boys knew of jewels and ornaments each of them realised at once that these things they saw were genuine and of great value. And Romaine recounted the history of some of them briefly. They had belonged to the men and women of the Spiri-

doff line, some were the gifts of emperors, kings and princes, some had been bought in the Far East, one, a magnificent ruby, a globe of the purest red hanging from a collar of lesser rubies, had been a present from an Indian rajah to a Prince Spiridoff of the Sixteenth Century.

"I don't think of their value in coin," said Romaine, letting a chased chain of gold and silver slip slowly through his fingers into the silk-lined box. "I think of them as my ancestors' treasures. I have seen my mother wear some of them at home; I have heard my father tell the story of how many of them came into our possession. And to think that Ivan Levine and the tavern-keeper and that rascal Disdoff wanted to take them from me! I would have fought them to my last drop of blood rather than have them touch this box with their dirty fingers!" He gave a little laugh. "But they could never have found it. What do you think of my hiding-place, Rodney?"

"I don't see how anyone could have discovered it," said Rodney.

"I did a lot of thinking," Romaine continued, "before I hit on this place. I wanted to keep the box somewhere near at hand, under my eye, as it were; and yet in a place where my enemies couldn't possibly find

it, even if they had the run of the cottage unmolested. What could be better than one of these solid beams? I know something about carpentry—it has always been one of my hobbies; and so I sawed through that beam, hollowed it out, fastened hinges. I'll lay you odds of a million to one that a man might search this place for a month or a year and never pull that beam open and look inside."

"You're right," agreed Stephen. "He couldn't. It's the best hiding-place I ever saw."

Romaine put the jewels and necklaces, the rings and the stars back in their cushioned cases, packed them into the box, locked it, and returned it to its pocket. He fastened it in with the pegs, lifted the beam and swung it into place. Only if one knew where to look could one detect the slightest sign of the work of a saw on the outside of the wood.

At noon the same idea occurred to the host and his guests—they wanted to go in swimming. They sought the eastern beach and bathed in the cool water without any apprehension of meeting smugglers or enemies. Lunch followed, and then Tom declared that the crew of the *Penguin* would set sail to see if there was any sign of the *William Howitt* on that part of the coast.

The three shipmates cruised among the islands under their own sail. With a favoring wind they covered a good deal of water, but caught no sight of the schooner. "She's gone," said Stephen, as they brought the *Penguin* about on the homeward tack. "And a good riddance too!"

They had time to stop at Swannock's Neck before sunset. Mrs. Widdicome and her husband were both in the store and glad to see the boys. "You don't think so badly of us now, I hope," said Stephen. "I know we look pretty disreputable—especially Roddy here, with his lobster skin—but we're not villains."

"I think you're mighty nice young fellows," answered Mrs. Widdicome. "Silas has told me all about what you've been doing. I think it was splendid of you to help him make those men take the furs back. The idea of their trying to get him in trouble. He's promised never to keep a secret from me again."

Widdicome looked rather sheepish as he smiled and nodded. "That's right, boys; that's right. If I'd only had Martha up in my room that night she'd have told those scamps just exactly where they got off."

From Widdicome the boys learned that Constable James Moody had taken his prisoners to Portland and

that no more trouble was to be expected from them. He also told them that Christopher Wilkins had gone to the city, where he meant to look for work.

The storekeeper walked to the waterfront with the boys and said goodbye, adding that he hoped they'd look in at Swannock's Neck the next time they cruised that way.

The *Penguin* was sailing among the islands out toward Refugee Rock when Craddock, in his noisy motorboat, hove in sight. He waved his hand, and after a few minutes was alongside the knockabout. "Well," he said, "you had better luck than I did. You got those three men. But I don't bear ye no grudge. What were those foreigners after?"

"They were after the treasures of the house of Spiridoff," Stephen answered grandly. "And the Spiridoffs, as you probably know, are one of the oldest families in Europe and have any number of castles on the Black Sea."

Craddock's eyes puckered in surprise; he stared at Stephen, and then a grin creased his weather-beaten cheeks. "You're a great kidder, you are," he chuckled. "Treasures of the house of What-d'you-call-it! You can't fool old Benjamin."

"All right. Have it your own way then," said Ste-

phen. And as the *Penguin* drew away from the other boat he called, "Don't forget to throw the little lobsters back into the ocean. We may want some if we come along here next year."

"There's always plenty of lobsters in Swannock's Neck. There's Silas Widdicome, for instance," was the fisherman's parting shaft.

"The treasures of the house of Spiridoff," repeated Tom, sitting at the wheel. "That does sound pretty thrilling."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" demanded Stephen.

"The first time I saw Pierre Romaine I knew he was different from other people," said Rodney.

"That's because he was practising fencing," said Tom.

"No, it wasn't that only. Somehow he looked as if he might be a prince."

"Prince or no prince, he's a good fellow anyhow," said Stephen. "And I hope we can get him to go on the cruise with us."

That night the shipmates repeated their invitation. "Everything's snug about here now," said Tom. "And we've plenty of room in the boat."

"Well, I would like to join you," answered Romaine. "I should feel quite deserted with the smugglers and

the schooner and you all leaving at once. I'll see what Simmons thinks."

Simmons came at his call. "Do you think you can look after the Rock in my absence?" Romaine asked. "I've been invited to go for a cruise in the *Penguin.*"

"I'm certain of it, Mr. Pierre. And if you're not here, there won't be very much for me to look after."

"You forget the Lady Isabelle, Simmons. I shall leave her in your charge. And if anything happens to her I shall never forgive you."

The servant smiled. "Her ladyship shall have every attention, sir. I shall see that nobody takes her down from her place on the mantel. I really wish you would go, Mr. Pierre."

"You mean it would be a load off your mind?" Romaine suggested. He looked at the boys. "Simmons is a wonderful fellow; but he does take me and my affairs very seriously."

"Quite so, sir," said Simmons. "But if you'll pardon my saying so, a young man like you does take a lot of looking after."

"You do it splendidly," laughed Pierre Romaine; "as you do everything, Simmons."

Next morning they breakfasted early, and soon afterwards the *Penguin,* with her crew of four aboard, spread her sail and left Refugee Rock for the broad and smiling ocean.

THE END

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